

MEDICINE BUDDHA

UNLOCK THE POWER AND PURPOSE OF YOUR MIND



DEDICATION

With heartfelt gratitude to my precious gurus:

Les Sheehy, extraordinary source of inspiration and wisdom;

Geshe Acharya Thubten Lodon, peerless master and embodiment of the Dharma;

Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, precious Vajra Acharya and yogi.

Guru is Buddha, Guru is Dharma, Guru is Sangha,

Guru is the source of all happiness.

To all gurus I prostrate, make offerings and go for refuge.

May this book carry waves of inspiration from my own gurus

To the hearts and minds of countless living beings.

May all beings have happiness and the true causes of happiness.

May all beings be free from suffering and the true causes of suffering;

May all beings never be parted from the happiness that is without suffering, the great joy of nirvana liberation;

May all beings abide in peace and equanimity, their minds free from attachment and aversion, and free from indifference.

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INTRODUCTION

The words 'medication' and 'meditation' are only one letter different for good reason: they both come from the Latin root, medeor, meaning 'to heal,' or 'to make whole.' Whether we medicate or meditate, our purpose is the same.

While advances in Western medicine have been extraordinary, their focus has been primarily been on humans as biological systems. Less well known, but no less extraordinary, the healing practices of Tibetan Buddhism have had a similar but opposite focus on humans as energetic systems.

It is our immense good fortune to be living at a time when we have access to the best of both East and West.

Body and mind: two aspects of the same whole

The interplay between energy and matter, or mind and body, is increasingly accepted. No medical eyebrows would be raised by the suggestion that stress is a cause of cardiac arrest or that anxiety can lead

to digestive problems. Dis-ease of the mind manifests in physical form.

The only question is: how much?

The onset of disease may therefore present us with an intriguing invitation. What if illness isn't simply accidental, but rather has come about because something in our inner state is out of kilter? Many of us may be exposed to a virus but only some of us will be affected by it and to very different extents. Why so?

In the West, when we become sick our first instinct is often for medicine - an external, physical fix. Even when our symptoms are of the mental variety, such as depression or insomnia, we are just as likely to emerge from our doctor's rooms with a prescription for a drug, as we would with a referral to a psychologist. We may believe we're on the road to better health, clutching that prescription. And who knows, perhaps that belief will do as much for us as the drugs themselves? But unless we use the power of our own minds, it's like going into battle against disease with one arm tied firmly behind our back. Why would we choose to do that when we also have such powerful inner tools at our disposal?

Illness as a pathway to inner growth

In my early thirties, for the first time in my life I started breaking out in small, angry welts which, as the weeks progressed, developed into full-blown rashes that might appear on my leg, arm or torso. After an especially bad case when my whole back was a welt of hives, I went to the doctor who correctly diagnosed an allergy of unknown origin and prescribed anti-histamine pills. If you start feeling itchy, he told me, just take a pill and it will clear up.

It did. But several months later, popping yet another pill, I recognized I was merely masking the symptoms and doing nothing about the cause. I still had no idea what the cause actually was. The fortuitous arrival of a leaflet from a local naturopath saw me sitting in her office one afternoon. Unlike the doctor, she had the time to ask about everything I typically consumed on a daily basis. Once we reached my fifth cup of coffee of the day, she gently suggested that I may have a caffeine intolerance. She also observed that I was highly stressed. Her prescription was a rigorous detox – and meditation.

It is no exaggeration to say that her suggestion has transformed my life. Decades later I am actually grateful to have gone through that time of caffeine intolerance. It turned out to be the path by which I came to experience a much more relaxed, panoramic, outwardly-focused and benevolent reality than the intense and tightly-grasped version I inhabited before. My physical disease turned out to be the catalyst for inner growth.

I know it's the same for many others. I've been told by people how grateful they feel even for having had life-threatening conditions like cancer or heart attacks. We can reframe physical illness as a motivator to reassess who and what really matters to us, or to make changes we may have already have sensed should be made. Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, who experienced, first hand, what it means to lose everything made the observation: 'Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.'

Illness may leave us diminished and frightened. Or more empathetic, compassionate and authentic. Physical suffering may be used to propel us on a journey of transcendence. As it is understood in the East - no mud, no lotus.

Mind training for healing and transcendence

How, exactly, do we transform mud into lotus? What, precisely, are the methods by which we use mind, as well as conventional medicine, to help prevent and counter disease? Tibetan Buddhism provides a number of healing practices, with perhaps the best known being Medicine Buddha - a powerful, holistic package of meditation, mantra recitation and visualization.

Before going further I should emphasize that Buddhism is a non-theistic tradition. There is no belief in an external, benevolent, omnipotent being who, asked the right way, will free us of disease. The Buddhist view is that if such a being existed, it would already have acted. Which one of us, despite our limitations, wouldn't end disease forever, given the chance?

It's more helpful to think of Medicine Buddha as embodying qualities symbolic of potent energies to which we can gain access by following the same practices used by others for millennia. An understanding of the Buddhist concept of sunyata supports an accurate understanding of this notion.

Our main challenge as we approach the practice is our tendency to sell ourselves short. In a society which still unknowingly clings to the outmoded ideas of Newtonian physics, we believe that matter is all that exists, and as a result have a tragically diminished idea of who and what we really are.

Tibetan Buddhist masters of consciousness, like quantum scientists, have a different perspective. What if solid matter really is more illusion-like than real? If the way that things exist has a fluidity and interconnectedness and depends as much on the mind of the observer as on what is being observed? What if our consciousness isn't, in fact, the size of our heads, but has no boundaries at all? If particle is also wave, and the way it manifests can be influenced by intention? Such possibilities open up an entirely complementary pathway to healing.

The founder of the Tibetan Buddhist Society which I attend, Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden often used to lean forward on his teaching throne, with the index finger of his left hand curled tightly.

'Your problem is that your mind is like this,' he used to say. 'The size of a sesame seed!'

Geshe-la was constantly inviting us to think bigger, to expand our view of consciousness and what was possible – practices he exemplified himself.

It is my privilege to extend his invitation onto you. Your mind is not the size of a sesame seed. Your consciousness is capable of far more than you may think. When it comes to healing, you don't have to swallow the capsule or receive the chemo and just hope for the best. There are also other things you can do besides. Through the Medicine Buddha we have the extraordinary opportunity to unlock the power of our own minds – and to emerge from whatever challenges we face with more gratitude, lightness and an expanded sense of possibilities than anything we may currently imagine.

HOW DO TIBETAN BUDDHIST HEALING PRACTICES WORK?

A WESTERN PERSPECTIVE

When Tibetan Buddhist lamas teach healing practices like Medicine Buddha, they don't usually talk in terms of evidence-based research, however compelling that research may be. The profound impact of meditation on endorphins and telomeres may be exciting to those of us who seek proof that these exotic, Eastern practices really work. In the Himalayas, however, where Medicine Buddha has been practiced for centuries and Tibetan Buddhists have a natural reverence for their teachers, they are happy to take such practices on trust.

We may smile indulgently, at this idea. But how different is it from the same trust we invest in our pharmacists or doctors? If they tell us that some kind of medicine will help us, chances are we'll believe them. We have no way to question whatever technical explanation they may offer. We take the medicine because we trust that they are more educated in the subject than we are, and that their motivation is benevolent.

While long accepted in the Himalayas, mind-based healing practices

are, nevertheless, still relatively new in the West. So for those of us who are naturally inclined to empirical rigor, it is reassuring that when studied through the lens of scientific inquiry, abundant evidence has been found to show that they work. Interestingly, it is only in recent years we have had technology sufficiently sophisticated enough to measure just how profound some of their impacts are, because they mostly occur beneath our conscious awareness.

In this section I explore a number of different ways we can account for the effect of mind-based healing. Some of these are strongly measurement-based. Others are more hypothetical. Feel free to take on board those you find useful and put to one side those you don't.

Meditation is intrinsically healing

Meditation is a healing activity. The simple act of sitting in meditation posture while focusing the mind has a profound impact on mind and body. Back in the 1980s Harvard Medical School cardiologist, Dr. Herbert Benson, began investigating how to help his patients' bodies do what they do best: repair themselves. Exploring a variety of different methods, meditation was

the one that best optimized self-repair. He found it particularly striking that self-repair was boosted well beyond any specific meditation session, and that over a period of time its benefits were cumulative.

A huge volume of research shows that when we meditate, we hormonally shift gear, producing significantly less cortisol, a stress hormone, and dramatically increasing endorphins, which boost our immunity. Endorphins are our front-line defense against viruses and other foreign organisms. It's no accident that we're more likely to fall victim to cold and flu viruses when we're feeling run-down.

In this current time of coronavirus, being anxious and worried isn't simply an unhappy place to be mentally. It almost certainly means that our endorphin production is way below where we'd want it to be. Even if we are unable to fend off a highly contagious virus, the severity with which we are affected will be determined in part by our own immune defenses. Taking control of our mental state is therefore of vital importance.

Another immunity-boosting hormone, which markedly increases when we meditate, is melatonin, a powerful antioxidant that destroys harmful free radicals, which cause huge destruction at a cellular level.

Serotonin, a neurotransmitter turbo-charged by meditation, helps regulate mood, appetite and sleep. While it may not directly impact on our immune response, it plays an important support role. Intriguingly, most anti-depressants prescribed today are Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors or SSRIs which work by increasing levels of serotonin in the brain. How about we give ourselves a daily anti-depressant by meditating?

Recent studies show how meditation can help manage chronic inflammatory conditions such as rheumatoid arthritis, asthma and inflammatory bowel disease. It can slow the rate of ageing by elevating levels of telomerase – the enzyme supporting the resilience of the telomeres that cap our DNA.

Evidently, meditation changes our body chemistry measurably and significantly for the better. But how? In simple terms, our bodies are highly effective at physiologically translating whatever is going on in our mind. Horrified thoughts cause the prefrontal cortex of our brain to shut down, our amygdala to ramp up, and we are instantly primed for fight or flight. Sexual thoughts cause an altogether different chain of hormonal and physiological reactions. As we think, so we become - sometimes, almost instantly.

When we meditate, we are deliberately optimizing our state of mind - and our body responds. Calm, confident and serene translates physiologically in ways we are only now able to measure. What is known for sure is that regular meditation supports the most happy, healthy, immune, well-adjusted and pain-free version of ourselves. And its side-effects are entirely positive!

What we imagine has the same biological impact as what is real

In a now-famous experiment by neuroscientist Alvaro Pascual-Leone, people with no piano-playing experience were recruited and taught to play a simple melody of just a few notes. The subjects were divided into two groups with one group allowed to practice on a piano, and the other allowed to sit at the piano but only imagine playing the melody.

Using Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation, Pascual-Leone mapped everyone's brain activity before, during and after the experiment. What he found was that people who only imagined playing the melody showed exactly the same brain changes as those who actually did. Their brains responded to the imagined as though it was real.

In a different study by Professor Karen Olness, children were shown a video in which policemen puppets – personifying the immune system – battled against virus puppets, with a simple explanation of what was going on. The video was followed by a guided visualization during which the kids were asked to imagine lots of policemen puppets throughout their bodies. When saliva samples were taken, their immunoglobulin levels were substantially higher, as though they had been fighting off a real infection.

For minds and bodies, what we imagine can be real. We experience pure terror, with all its physiological impacts, walking along a country path and stepping on what we think is a snake, even though it turns out to be a branch. We may be aroused by the imagined presence of our lover, even though he or she is in the next city. Our minds are suggestible.

The focal point of all healing practices in Tibetan Buddhism is a powerful visualization. In the case of Medicine Buddha, for example, healing lights and nectars stream from the Buddha's body and bowl into one's own body, eliminating all negativities, disease, and harmful viruses, as well as immeasurably strengthening one's own immunity, energy levels and resilience. We are always encouraged to make this process not only as vivid as we can, but also personal. If, for example, we are battling with

cancer in a particular organ, then a visualization focusing on that particular organ is recommended.

We experience what we expect

Although we believe ourselves to be impartial observers of the world around us, the neuroscientific reality is that we are much more the creators of our own reality than we suppose. Our experiences are shaped to a large extent by expectations and beliefs – a dynamic responsible for a significant level of healing.

The placebo effect is what happens when a person is given a sugar pill with no therapeutic agent and told it will relieve their pain - and a short while later the pain has gone. Repeated tests show placebos to be as effective as real drugs in anywhere between 15% - 70% of all healing. Placebos have been studied as treatment for a wide range of conditions, from chronic pain and depression, to Parkinson's disease. Studies have shown that placebos are effective irrespective of factors like intelligence, or even because people really want them to work. And their result is not purely subjective – studies of asthma patients showed less constriction

of the bronchial tubes, and patients suffering from chronic pain had higher concentrations of endorphins after taking a placebo. Significantly, the more contact with a physician or doctor, the greater the placebo effect.

In our Western culture, faith healing has had an established place among some religious groups, where spontaneous remission and other miracles continually occur. These are attributed to God, angels, the Holy Spirit or other powerful and external agencies.

Growing up in Zimbabwe, I was familiar with the powers of the N'anga, or traditional healer, in Shona society, who was believed to possess not only curative abilities, but also the sinister power to put the curse of death on people – who might unaccountably waste away or develop a terminal disease.

The common theme running through all these is that belief, trust or expectation, in itself, can be enough to create healing. Whether we place our confidence in the doctor in the white coat, the priest in the purple robes or the N'anga in his leopard-skin, or the agencies they invoke – science, God, spirits – the process is the same.

One thing I like about Tibetan Buddhism is the way it cuts through all

this to what is really going on. Yes there is an important role for a leader - in our case a teacher - to communicate confidence in the process. Ritual, too, has its place. But healing isn't arising from a force outside us, even though it may be helpful to objectify the process in such a way. The power resides in our own mind. So let's place our confidence in that, and in the specific practices evolved to tap into some of our own under-utilized capacity to heal.

Resonance

Actions undertaken in the past become easier and more effective for living beings to carry out in the future. For example, if rats are taught a new trick in a laboratory in USA, rats in laboratories in other parts of the world will learn that same new trick more quickly (Rupert Sheldrake, Morphic Resonance). Over time, people score higher and higher on standard IQ tests – a phenomenon known as the 'Flynn Effect'. Average scores of 100 rise steadily over a period of years. There is no indication that people are becoming more intelligent, merely that they are getting better at doing intelligence tests. When the tests are revised, as they are periodically, scores once again return to 100.

The theory of resonance – and it is still a theory - suggests that when we do something that has been done before, we become linked, through an organizing pattern of influence, or a field, to others who have done the same thing. We resonate with them. Like other fields—electric, magnetic, radiation—the field may be invisible, but its effects are not.

What happens when we recite a mantra that has been repeated by millions of people for thousands of years? When we focus on the same image that they have focused on and conduct the same process of energetic invocation? We bring ourselves into resonance with them. We benefit from their cumulative influence – and in turn, contribute to that influence for the benefit of those who follow.

As we sit in our room reciting mantras, we may be physically alone, but in a different way we are tuning into an influence and community, an energetic field reaching through time and space in ways beyond what we generally consider.

The energetic power of mantras

From the earliest of times, sound has been regarded as a subtle manifestation of energy. Pythagoras taught that just as one plucked string can cause another to vibrate, our own mind resonates when exposed to certain sounds. We all know how certain pieces of music make us feel happy or moved, and studies show that sound can change our physiological functioning too.

Tibetan Buddhist healing mantras are usually in Sanskrit, the 4000 year old Indo-European “mother language,” and origin of a surprising number of our own words in English. The word “mind,” appropriately, comes from the Sanskrit “man.” And mantra, short for man-traya, translates literally as mind protection.

Sanskrit arose initially as an oral, rather than written, language, with the emphasis on sound. Ancient meditation practitioners from the time of the Vedas understood that we comprise not only physical systems, but energetic systems too – the channels and chakras of a subtle body. It is believed that mantras embody specific sounds and rhythms to impact on our subtle energy or prana, which in turn has a physical manifestation. The

way that we move our mouth and tongue to form mantras, as well as the sound of mantra itself, has a subtle, energetic impact, whether we chant mantras aloud or whisper them under our breath.

Mantras can be used for a variety of purposes besides healing – to invoke energy, confidence, harmony and equanimity to name just a few. And they are always repeated a number of times – 21 and 100 being common mantra counts, with wrist malas – or rosaries – and standard size malas designed for this purpose.

Repetition of any action has been shown to change brain functioning. In the words of Canadian neuroscientist Donald Hebb, “neurons that fire together, wire together,” and over time create neural pathways that make certain patterns of thought or states of being more habitual and easier. What happens when we repeat mantras over days, weeks, months? From the perspective of neuroscience, we create conduits for specific states that will ultimately change the structure of our brain, triggering changes in our physiology. From an energetic viewpoint, the sounds we create changes the state of our subtle body in a way that can become physically manifest.

Summary

To summarize, mind-based healing in Tibetan Buddhism, from a Western perspective, is founded on meditation, a practice already amply demonstrated to boost immunity, promote wellbeing and support longevity. Visualization harnesses the proven power of suggestibility, while mantra invokes sound healing or shifts at a subtle, energetic level. All of these combined, with repetition, change our brain functioning, creating fresh neural pathways mirrored by broader physiological change. These are holistic practices with holistic outcomes.

What's more, the impacts of the practices on our attitude towards coping with disease have yet to be fully explored. But it seems likely that they give us tools for empowerment. For reframing what we are experiencing from that of a victim, to someone capable of emerging with greater insight and even gratitude. Someone who has used the mud, to whatever extent possible, to transform into the lotus. Such transcendence, when attained, may well be the most important outcome of all because our mind stream, unlike our body, continues beyond death.

WHERE DOES MEDICINE BUDDHA FIT WITHIN TIBETAN BUDDHISM?

We all come to the Dharma, as Buddha's teachings are collectively known, in different ways. For some people, the philosophy of loving kindness may resonate strongly. Others may be excited by the opportunity provided by mind-watching-mind meditation to take charge of our own thoughts and feelings. And there are many other concepts and practices besides! We may read books or online articles, or attend introductory classes. However we come to the Dharma, it takes time to put it all together. To understand the coherent and sublime whole.

In saying this I am making no claims, by the way, about my own understanding of the Dharma. Like so much other wisdom, the more you know, the dumber you feel!

But I know enough to understand that Medicine Buddha is an integrated part of the Dharma. It was not evolved as a stand-alone practice to be removed and used without any reference to any other Buddhist concepts. On the contrary, we could see it as a pathway to explore other such concepts more deeply.

Introducing Medicine Buddha practice is therefore something of a challenge, much like trying to describe the pattern formed by one particular color in a tapestry without going too deeply into the patterns formed by others. In the following summary of how Medicine Buddha fits within Tibetan Buddhism, I have provided some links to help you explore and understand important and related subjects, depending where you are on your own personal journey.

The purpose of yidams

Medicine Buddha is a yidam in the class of Kriya Tantra, or action practices, in Tibetan Buddhism. Other Kriya Tantra yidams you may have heard of are Green Tara, White Tara, and Black Manjushri. The word yidam is sometimes translated as “deity” but, as noted at the outset, we need to take care not to regard them as independent, divine powers whom we invoke, but rather capabilities that exist within our own mind. We all possess Buddha nature. We all have the capacity for enlightenment. The ability to go beyond all forms of suffering, including disease is not so much possible as inevitable for each one of us – the only question is, how much suffering are we willing to endure before we say “enough already!” You can

read a little more about the role of yidams here: <https://davidmichie.com/if-buddhists-are-non-theistic-why-do-they-have-deities/>

A movie-script for our mind

When we practice Medicine Buddha we are engaged in a form of mind training which includes a holistic combination of intention, meditation, visualization and mantra recitation. As with other Kriya Tantra practices, we follow a structure, like a play or movie script, which outlines what is to be said and visualized. It is up to us, as directors of our own subjective experience, to interpret the script in the most powerful and personally meaningful way that we can with every 'performance'.

In broad terms, we begin with the preliminary practices of taking refuge and cultivating bodhichitta, before reciting the four immeasurables and the seven limb prayer. After the Medicine Buddha practice itself, which includes visualization and mantra recitation, we conclude with verses of dedication. The preliminaries and concluding practices are all deeply meaningful, and the further you go on your Dharma journey, the more meaningful they become. When you begin, your first thought may be "Why bother will all this stuff at the beginning? I just want to go straight to the sweet spot?"

Doing this, however, would be a grave mistake. You would rob your practice of context, power and meaning. Right now, if you're a newcomer to this, you'll just have to take my word for it. Later, as you become a more seasoned practitioner, you will understand and appreciate for yourself the extraordinary depth and meaning that all these complementary practices have.

If you were to ask Lama Google, you'd find variations in exactly how the preliminaries and main practice are undertaken, the wording and length of the verses, and how many times they are recited. There are even variations in the Medicine Buddha mantra itself. This doesn't make some versions right and others wrong. Differences can be accounted for according to such things as the lineage of a teacher, and whether they pronounce something according to Sanskrit or Tibetan. For example the word 'svaha' appears at the end of many mantras. A Sanskrit speaker would pronounce it phonetically 'sva-ha'. A Tibetan 'so-ha.' We are in toh-mah-toe, toe-may-toe territory here. Both work.

According to my kind teacher, Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, 'It is not the words themselves that give mantras their power; it is the faith with which they are recited.'

Where to begin?

What happens if you're new to Buddhism but feel drawn to Medicine Buddha? Must you have formally taken refuge, for example, to recite the lines of refuge at the beginning? Must you fully understand the seven limb prayer before you can recite it?

In a word, 'no.' It would be fair to say that fully understanding the process on which we're embarking is a lifetime's journey. Our first step is to become familiar with the words. Then we begin to understand the meaning of the words. Further down the track we are able to experience the meaning of the words, which is when our practice becomes more authentic and heartfelt.

This is not an overnight process but a gradual unfolding and we all start out at different places. So by all means, if Medicine Buddha is your first formal contact with the Dharma, feel free to dive right in. Remember,

nothing happens by chance and it is no coincidence that you are reading these pages, here and now.

For some initial explanation of important concepts mentioned:

Taking refuge:

<https://www.samyeling.org/buddhism-and-meditation/teaching-archive-2/choje-akong-tulku-rinpoche/the-meaning-of-taking-refuge/>

Cultivating bodhicitta:

<https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/bodhicitta-perfection-dharma-0>

The four immeasurables:

<https://tricycle.org/magazine/four-immeasurables/>

The seven limb prayer:

<https://www.jewelheart.org/blog/the-seven-limbs-or-seven-practices/>

Dedication:

<https://www.lionsroar.com/how-to-practice-dedicating-merit/>

Sunyata – an introduction:

<https://davidmichie.com/the-santa-clause-like-me/>

Karma

Earlier I made the point that when explaining the practice of Medicine Buddha, lamas traditionally don't refer to such things as endorphins and telomeres. So how do they account for the effect of Medicine Buddha?

The Buddhist view is that our entire experience of reality, good or bad, can be accounted for in terms of karma. We are constantly creating causes for future effects to be experienced. And when these causes meet with certain conditions, they ripen. If we have the subjective experience of abundance, this arises because of our previous generosity. If we experience disease or ill-health, it is because we caused harm to others. Not necessarily in this lifetime. And not necessarily to the degree that we are experiencing it now because karma multiplies.

These concepts sit uncomfortably in a society which likes to believe that children come into this world as blank slates, *tabula rasa*, rather than as fresh manifestations of a subtle consciousness which has existed in other states before.

Karma is a vast subject in itself, but there is a particular element I'd like to highlight: the subjectivity of our experience. As science shows us,

we are much less the passive receptors of what is going on in the world around us, than vigorous projectors of our own particular version of reality. A version which has evolved as the result of wide and varied lifetimes of different karmas, bringing us to where we are, here and now. This helps explain why we can see, hear and taste the same things as even people we are very close to, and yet our experience of them may be completely different.

We all have storehouses of karmic seeds, positive and negative, any of which could ripen under certain conditions. It may not be my fault that I have so many horrors in the storehouse – ‘me,’ in this case, being the acquired personality of David with whom I identify in this lifetime. True, it may not be my fault, but it is my problem.

When we practice the Dharma, we take responsibility for this problem by purifying negative karma as much as we’re able and by accumulating positive karma. The best way we do is by following the structure already outlined – taking refuge and generating bodhichitta being the powerful basis of purification, the four immeasurables and dedication generating and preserving merit, and the seven limb practice for both purification and generating merit.

These are not mundane lines that we are reciting. When we penetrate their meaning, we recognize that they have the power not only to profoundly change one particular lifetime, but to set us on a trajectory that will ultimately take us beyond life and death.

Medicine Buddha has evolved specifically to purify negative karmas causing physical and mental disease. Where do these karmas exist? In our mind-stream. There is no celestial mainframe, no Buddha or God who doles out good experiences to well-behaved people and scourges the wicked with adversity. We are the captains of our own karmic ships, the authors of our own destiny. As human beings, we have a unique freedom to take conscious charge of where we are headed - if we are awake to this opportunity.

To return to our starting point, as far as Buddhism is concerned, the origin of all physical disease may be said to be psychological. There are mental factors which predispose us to experience reality in a particular way. By undertaking Medicine Buddha practice, we purify negative factors and create positive ones. We can rationalize this process in terms of endorphins and telomeres, if that's helpful. But once you have confidence in the process, the science actually becomes of less interest – in the same

way that you don't need empirical evidence that a cool drink on a hot day is wonderfully refreshing!

Energetic healing for self and others

We take for granted that our minds influence our bodies. Embarrassing thoughts make the blood vessels in our cheeks dilate. Shock makes them constrict. When we suddenly become the focus of unwelcome attention, our mouths may dry up, or we may perspire more than usual. How much of a leap is it really to suggest that we can deliberately target physical change, healing, through certain mind-based practices?

In describing how Medicine Buddha practice works, Tibetan Buddhist teachers talk about how our bodies comprise prana or energy which can be directed by mind to influence our body. If our mind is dynamic, energetic and can be directed by us, then why would it not impact on physical form? And intriguingly, what if it could influence other beings too? This is the basis of Reiki and various forms of energetic healing. When much-loved lamas fall sick, sometimes entire monasteries will recite mantras and perform purifying rituals in an effort to help return them to good health. Teachers don't hesitate to advise their students to carry out healing

practices for loved ones, human or animal.

There is another dimension to this as well. Although I have taken care to emphasize that deity practice is not about invoking external beings with god-like powers to help us, in Tibetan Buddhism there is little that's black-and-white, and a great deal that's as ambiguous as a quantum physicist's description of matter!

The original Medicine Buddha we were first told about in seventh century manuscripts, was once an ordinary man who vowed that, when he became enlightened, he would dedicate himself to relieving the sickness and disease of all living beings. Since that time, countless others have followed him to enlightenment. Their consciousness exists somewhere, and when we repeat their mantra, it is believed they immediately know it and wish to help. The image is sometimes offered of a hoop we must create, if we are to be hooked to safety. Something must come from our side, in other words, if we are to connect with the healing energies of the Buddhas and, in this case, that something is the practice of Medicine Buddha. Other enlightened beings may be similarly invoked by their mantras, which is why yidams and mantra practice go hand-in-hand.

The role of the teacher

Tibetan Buddhism places great emphasis on the role of the teacher, or guru, especially in tantra. Some practices require initiation from a teacher before you may practice them, including a version of Medicine Buddha, but not the one I outline here. Why the big deal about this relationship? Why can't you just watch a YouTube video and take it from there?

You wouldn't embark on a course of conventional medicine without seeking professional attention. Even if you were able to get hold of medicines without prescription, how could you be certain you were taking the most appropriate ones and in the right dosage? Before wading into pharmaceutical territory, in other words, you wouldn't presume to have the same knowledge that it takes doctors years of study and experience to acquire.

It is the same in the realm of energetic healing, if not more so. Because we are using mind-training tools including expectation and imagination, you must have confidence in the practices or they won't work.

When I made the point early on about how a person's confidence in their prescription may be as effective in healing them as the prescription itself,

I wasn't being entirely mischievous. Credibility is important. If you need surgery for an important operation, chances are you will make a point of finding out who is the best in the field. From a Dharma perspective, how much more important is your ultimate spiritual destiny?

This is why we need to be rigorous in ensuring that our own teacher is the real deal. The role of the teacher, or guru, is a very profound subject, as we all come to understand in our own way. His or her role is not only to explain the nuts and bolts of the practice, but also to show how it integrates within the Dharma path. There are many 'slippery fish' concepts in Buddhism, perhaps the most slippery being sunyata, an understanding of which is foundational to tantra practices. Helping you get a firm grip on them is an important role of your guru. Also, many practices like Medicine Buddha are rich in symbolism and the transmission of their meaning may only be achieved in person. Your teacher will ideally embody some of the qualities of a Buddha and be a source of inspiration so that you develop a strong conviction that realizing the qualities of a Buddha is not only possible, but actually the most worthwhile goal of your life. For more advice on this important subject, please see: <https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/chapter/chapter-three-relying-spiritual-teacher>

You may very well be wondering right now, 'So what about you, David Michie? What gives you the authority to write about Medicine Buddha?'

I have already said that I make no claims about my own qualities, understanding or practice. In that sense, nothing about me, personally, is noteworthy. What is extraordinarily noteworthy, however, are my teachers. I received Medicine Buddha initiations from Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden and from Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, as well as teachings on this subject from them both and from my kind and precious teacher, Les Sheehy. My lineage masters, the beings you may regard as comprising your spiritual family tree, are therefore impeccable. There is a saying in the Himalayas along the lines: "If you want to know about the purity of the water, check the ice from which it comes." Feel free to check out more about any of my teachers. I have complete confidence in them.

For the purposes of introducing you to Medicine Buddha, reading this short book is sufficient for you to start becoming familiar with the practice and using it to powerful effect. In time, if you don't already have a teacher, you will want to find one. To help with this, you may find the directory of Buddhist centers provided on this website helpful: www.buddhanet.net You'll want to focus on the Vajrayana teachers.

A few words on visualization

Visualization comes more easily when we are very familiar with what we are trying to imagine. In your mind's eye can you picture your mobile device? The front of your house? Familiarity is key. You'll find it a lot easier to imagine Medicine Buddha if you have images of him in places you'll see them frequently during the day. Beside your computer screen. On the fridge. On your bedside table. Find places you can display his image in a respectful way. Get used to how he looks, his color, robes, bowl, plant – just the generalities to begin with. The detail will come with time, making it easier and easier for you to see him when your eyes are shut. Even if your visualization is not great, just picturing a sphere of blue light with healing qualities is sufficient to get started.

THE PRACTICE OF MEDICINE BUDDHA

What you need to begin

A room that will be quiet for the next 20 minutes or so.

A straight backed chair or meditation cushion.

Somewhere to rest the device on which you are reading this.

A mala/rosary on which to keep a count of mantras is helpful, but not necessary.

Get into meditation posture

Whether in a chair or on a meditation cushion, assume your best, straight-back posture, hands in your lap or on your knees, comfortably rolled-back shoulders, and head tilted slightly down.

Take Refuge and Bodhichitta

As with all Tibetan Buddhist meditations, spend a short time taking refuge and establishing your bodhichitta motivation. Recite the following verse three times to focus on this intention:

To the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha I go for refuge.

Through the practice of Medicine Buddha,

May I, and all living beings, be free from disease, pain and suffering, and enjoy robust good health.

For the sake of all living beings, may I attain enlightenment.

Recite The Four Immeasurables

May all beings have happiness and the true causes of happiness.

May all beings be free from suffering and the true causes of suffering.

May all beings never be parted from the happiness that is beyond suffering.

May all beings abide in peace and equanimity, their minds free from attachment, aversion and free from indifference.

Recite the Seven Limbed Prayer

With body, speech and mind

I bow to the Buddha,

Making real and imagined offerings vast as space,

I regret all my negativities, and rejoice in all virtues.

Please remain until every living being is Awakened.

I request wise and compassionate guidance,

And dedicate my merit, and the merit of others, to the enlightenment of all living beings.

Invoke Medicine Buddha

Visualize that Medicine Buddha is sitting looking at you. His body is dark blue, like lapis lazuli, an archetypal color of healing. He is in the nature of light, like a rainbow or a hologram – vivid but intangible. With his left hand he holds a bowl of powerful healing nectars, and with his right, a medicine plant, the symbol of healing. Imagine that he is at about the height of your forehead, a few feet in front of you. He is everything beautiful gathered into one. He gazes at you with as much love as a mother for her only child.

Tune into the energetic feeling of his presence

What's really important is to have a very real sense that Medicine Buddha is actually there. That if you looked up, or opened your eyes, you would see him. Try and cultivate the feeling that you are in the presence of a truly amazing being. If you've ever had the privilege of being in an audience with someone such as The Dalai Lama, you will know that there is a palpable sensation to his being. He has an energetic presence. So too the Medicine Buddha.

Request

Request Medicine Buddha to help in whatever way is needed to help you or the person you are practicing for. You don't have to be a medical expert or have precise knowledge of the physiological changes that are needed. What matters here is intention. For example, your request may be to relieve pain, boost immunity, be free from viral symptoms such as a sore throat and temperature, to promote rapid recovery, be free from anxiety, depression or despair. We can also ask assistance for relief from circumstances that may be causing the condition or making it worse,

including poverty, work stress, bad living conditions and so on. We can make this request on our own behalf, or on behalf of others.

Visualize healing lights and nectars

Visualize that Medicine Buddha very willingly responds to your request. Instantly, deep blue colored healing lights and nectars emanate from his heart, come to the crown of your head and flow down, filling your body, or that of the being for whom you are practicing. You can direct the lights and nectars to specific parts of the body initially. But there is such an abundance of them, that they will end up filling the whole body.

If you wish, you can visualize other colored lights and nectars flowing from his heart into the crown of your head. The color white typically symbolizes purification and peace, orange – abundance, and red - energy. Dark blue is especially powerful. Imagine that this process eliminates and purifies all disease, pain and suffering and causes of disease, pain and suffering instantly, completely and permanently. Imagine it being incomparably more potent than the most powerful medical treatment.

Recite Medicine Buddha's mantra

While continuing with this visualization, recite Medicine Buddha's mantra.

Om Bekadze Bekadze Maha Bekadze Bekadze Radza Samungate Soha

Pronounced: Om beck-and-zay, beck-and-zay, ma-ha beck-and-zay, beck-and-zay, run-zuh sum-oon-gut-eh so-ha. The oon syllable to rhyme with the double 'o' in 'look'.

The very first time you say the mantra, it is traditional to precede it with the word 'Tayatha' meaning 'Like this,' and pronounced Tie-ya-tar.

Continue the visualization and mantra recitation for ten minutes if you are new to the practice. If you are a seasoned meditator, you may wish to go on for longer.

Dedication

Conclude your session with a dedication:

By this practice of Medicine Buddha,

May I (or the being for whom you are practicing), and all living beings be free from pain, disease and suffering.

May the precious, superior mind of bodhichitta,

Arise in those who have not yet been inspired by it,

And not decrease in those who have developed it,

But increase continuously.

A note on mantra counting

Mala beads are the traditional way of keeping track of your mantra count. A wrist mala typically has around 24 beads, and a standard mala 108 beads, measured to count 21 and 100 mantra recitations respectively – the assumption being that your concentration may just lapse for a few beads in each case! You could decide, for example, to dedicate one mala round to one aspect of healing – such as reducing pain – and another round to a different aspect – such as accelerating recovery. Or one round to one person, and another round to someone else. You may even want to create a list for your practice. I have found that the more structured my practice, the better I am able to focus on making every mantra count.

CONCLUSION

I hope that this short guide on Medicine Buddha offers a useful starting point for your own practice. My intention in writing it is to provide an accessible introduction to a precious practice, hoping that it may resonate with you.

If your curiosity has been awakened I really can't emphasize enough the importance of finding a qualified teacher from whom to receive further instruction and, in time, Medicine Buddha initiations, or empowerments. These will enable you to access the extraordinary power of this Kriya tantra practice at an even more transformative level.

I should like to end this short book, as I began it, by expressing my heartfelt gratitude to my own Dharma teachers: Geshe Acharya Thubten Lodon, Founder of the Tibetan Buddhist Society in Australia; Les Sheehy, director of the Tibetan Buddhist Society in Perth, Western Australia; and the Venerable Acharya Zasep Tulku Rinpoche, founder of Gaden for the West. I can never repay their kindness, and without them this book could never have been written.

For as long as space endures

And living beings remain,

May I, too, abide

to dispel the suffering of the world.

Shantideva, Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Michie is the author of The Dalai Lama's Cat series, The Magician of Lhasa and a number of non-fiction books including Buddhism for Busy People, Buddhism for Pet Lovers and Mindfulness is Better than Chocolate. He is also the founder of Mindful Safaris to Africa.

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MEDICINE BUDDHA

UNLOCK THE POWER AND PURPOSE OF YOUR MIND

David Michie