

Mapping the body with Buddhism: shifting fortunes of the tantric channel system in Tibetan medical anatomy

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This paper is about the relationship between medical theory and Buddhist theory in Tibet. It will study how these two kinds of writing have shared literary genres, strategies of argumentation, and doctrinal terminology, and yet diverged in basic orientation as well as the manner in which authoritative truth is conceptualised. I attribute much of this divergence to this fundamental difference: the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice is to gain enlightenment, while the ultimate goal of medical practice is to keep patients alive. I argue that the very different kinds of ways that the success of these two projects would be determined – and in particular, the special role of empirical observability in medicine – affected in turn the mentality of both traditions overall.

The paper draws on one section of a longer essay I am working on. It will focus on the increasingly vexed issue of how to account for the tantric system of channels in the face of increasing attention to empirical evidence in Tibetan medical tradition. A number of medical theorists from the 15th century onwards began to debate the question of why the tantric channels are not directly observable. They give a wide variety of responses, betraying a variety of attitudes toward religious authority and its relative status to empirical evidence, not to mention the complex question of how to conceptualize such discrepancies in written discourse.