

Life story of Dr. Tingri Menpa Sonam Tobgey

By Dr Donckie Tsultrim Emchi



Birthplace

Tingri Menpa Sonam Tobgey was born in Tingri, Western Tibet, (now called 'Old Tingri'), in the year of the Earth- Dragon of the Tibetan calendar, 1928 in the Western calendar. He was born into a family of three children, with a history of eight generations of traditional Tibetan doctors. His father - Tingri Menpa Penpa Tsering, and mother - Tsewang Lhamo, were both traditional Tibetan doctors.

It was very rare to find a female doctor then, because it was not usual for women to study medicine in Tibetan tradition. The reason was that it would be too difficult a job, and dangerous for women to travel across the huge landscapes of Tibet day after day to visit the patients. Therefore, it was easier for them to look after their families.

Tingri Menpa Sonam Tobgey's Father

The father of Tingri Menpa Pempa Tsering was the most famous eye-surgeon in Western Tibet. This meant a lot then, for surgery was something very uncommon. He was the first doctor to have found a cure against syphilis in Western Tibet. He was also experienced in detoxifying mercury, a method famous for being the most complex and difficult of all of the pharmacological practices of Traditional Tibetan Medicine (TTM).

Menpa Penpa Tsering seems to have been very knowledgeable, and one can say that he must already have developed a very scientific thinking, because he was practising many things which were very rare for his time and difficult to master, such as those mentioned above. This indicates a very high

degree of knowledge, so much more so as one should not forget that the modern tools and techniques were not yet available.

Studying Medicine

Menpa Sonam Tobgey seems to have been the brightest of the three children, so that he was chosen by his father to continue the family tradition of medicine. His father taught him all the theories and practices of Traditional Tibetan Medicine, and of course in particular the secret family tradition of knowledge, experience and recipes for curing all the special diseases such as glaucoma and syphilis. He transmitted to him all his experience in pharmacology, especially the detoxification of mercury.

According to Tibetan tradition, the experience of medical practice in a family was secretly transmitted only to one family member. Sonam Tobgey had this opportunity and added his own knowledge and experience over many years. He later settled down with his own family in Western Tibet. He received all his education as a doctor mainly from his father.

From the age of 8 until 12 he was taught mainly in the practice of herbal collection and its applications. From 12 until 20 he continued in general education of Traditional Tibetan Medicine. From 20 to 25 he made further medical study at the Chakpori Institute in Lhasa, the Capital of Tibet, and completed his last exams as doctor there. This institute was the only official institute in Central Tibet at that time. During his studies at the Chakpori Institute, he specialised in eye-surgery, just as his father taught him. He cured many patients from eye-diseases in the Lhasa, Gangpa and Shigatse area.

Medical Experiences

Like his father, Menpa Sonam Tobgey was not only known in Western Tibet to be the best eye-doctor, he was also a good veterinary surgeon. He cured many cows struck down by brain-worm disease, a widespread affliction among animals. These had such headaches that they would repeatedly crash their heads against a wall until they were bleeding strongly, so that they finally had to be killed. Menpa Sonam Tobgey was able to remove tapeworms from their brains without surgery. Not only this, he was also known as the 'tapeworm doctor of humans'. One could see on the top of the patients' heads the worms he was extracting directly from their brains - without surgery.

Thanks to the curing method of Menpa Sonam Tobgey, the killing of domestic animals, especially cows, was no longer necessary. He dealt with similar cases with human brains, for which the cause is known. In Tibet, it is usual to eat raw frozen meat from time to time, which can of course bring tapeworm eggs into the human body depending on the animals. After a certain time, the adult worms can move around inside the

body and end up in the brain, laying their eggs in turn and thus starting yet another, never-ending cycle of growing worms. The patients get headaches because of these worms moving around in their heads. This was the kind of disease that Menpa Sonam Tobgey was very good at curing. The therapy he used with humans was of course different from the one with cows, but his experience meant that he was in great demand in Tingri.

The way of finding special methods to cure special illnesses or diseases seems to be innate in this family of doctors. Moreover, Sonam Tobgey was a very skilful and inventive man when it came to doing something special with his patients. Like his father, he had two jobs, as a farmer and as a traditional doctor. Thus, he worked as a doctor for humans as well as a veterinary surgeon in Tingri until 1960, before China occupied the whole of Tibet and also the Tingri District, which belongs to the Shigatse Province.

Chinese Occupation of Tibet

After the occupation of Tibet through China, most Tibetans had to flee to India, including Menpa Sonam Tobgey's family. Shortly before they left, he had a daughter named Tsultrim Dönckie, who would be closely connected to his life. After leaving Tibet, Menpa Sonam Tobgey lived with his whole family in India and worked there for a while at the Medical-Astro Institute (Men-Tsee-Kang), which was founded in 1961 by H. H. the Dalai Lama. This institute was the first to promote Traditional Tibetan Medicine in exile. Because he had seven children to care for, it was impossible for him to live only as a doctor (Tibetan doctors traditionally did not make financial profit from their patients). Therefore, he was employed part-time as a simple worker in an Indian workers' group.

A Refugee in Switzerland

In 1969, the Swiss Red Cross took Tibetan refugees to Switzerland. Menpa Sonam Tobgey and his family went there among such a group of refugees. Thus, he became the first traditional Tibetan doctor living and practising in Europe at that time. The strict official rules and regulations of the local Health Ministry obviously meant that he was not officially allowed to practice Traditional Tibetan Medicine in Europe or in Switzerland. This unfortunate situation prevented him from helping the people in the West in the way he had done in Tibet, where he had saved many lives and relieved the suf-

fering of hundreds of people-over many decades. He only managed to use his years of experience and deep knowledge within a small group of Tibetans and Western people. Even though the health rules and regulations were extremely restrictive in those times, he had a lot of patients from all over Switzerland, Europe and other countries; as well as, of course, many Tibetan patients. In the Tibetan community in Switzerland, he is known as the 'good-hearted doctor'. His special field of eye-surgery and its practice unfortunately got lost as soon as he came to Switzerland, and was replaced by modern Western surgery. As a result, he redirected his energies and specialised in curing epilepsy with 'golden-needle' therapy and in produced further recipes based on the huge wealth of knowledge and experience of his family tradition.

In the field of pharmacology, he widely supported the late Mr. Lutz, founder of Padma AG Switzerland, in furnishing explanations and interpreting old text books of Traditional Tibetan Medicine and pharmacology, as well as in producing traditional recipes.

Family Tradition

In his own family, Menpa Sonam Tobgey had seven children, who all grew up in Switzerland and received their education in Tibet and Switzerland.

Because of the Swiss laws and regulations making it impossible to uphold the thousand-year-old Tibetan medical tradition and experience, the family heritage was threatened with dying out. For Menpa Sonam Tobgey, it was very sad to experience that this long tradition and part of the history of Traditional Tibetan Medicine could not be preserved because of regulations forbidding its official practice. Nonetheless, he did not give up hope. Once in a while, he took the time to teach one of his daughters, who - since her childhood, had seemed to show a natural interest in holistic healing and an aptitude for Traditional Tibetan Medicine.

In addition to benefiting from the teachings of her father, she assisted him with oral translations during consultations with his Western patients. In this manner, from an early age, she learned a great deal about his methods of healing and gained a great deal of his clinical knowledge and experience.

Legacy of a Family Tradition

The family tradition of Tibetan Medicine which Dr. Tingri Menpa Sonam Tobgey first brought to Western Europe, is now carried on by Dr Donckie Tsultrim Emchi.

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is the daughter of Menpa Sonam Tobgey, whom he personally trained in Traditional Tibetan Medicine. She was born in Tingri - shortly before the family was evacuated to Switzerland by the Swiss Red Cross in 1969 - completed her secondary studies in Switzerland, then returned to Tibet in order to formalise her qualifications in Traditional Tibetan Medicine. She graduated from Lhasa Medical University and now practises Traditional Tibetan Medicine in Switzerland.