

# Ancient Healing in Contemporary Days

By Leslie Ferguson-Oles, '05



This summer Dechen Jamling, '11, and her mother Dawa Dolma of Dharmasala, India traveled across the U.S. demonstrating Tibetan medicine techniques.

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Dechen Jamling, '11, looks like an average Berea College student. In the late May heat of Kentucky, she appears on campus in shorts and a tee-shirt, laptop in tow, her thoughts on finals in anatomy and psychology. It is a little surprising, then, to learn that back in Dharmasala, India, Dechen, a refugee of Tibet, has already completed six years of schooling to earn the title Dr. Dechen Jamling – Doctor of Tibetan Medicine.

Dechen is a second-generation doctor. Her mother, Dawa Dolma, has practiced Tibetan medicine for 32 years and currently heads the research department at the Tibetan Medical and Astrological Institute of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, where both mother and daughter received their educations. This past spring, Dawa visited her daughter in Berea on her sixth, jam-packed trip to the United States. This trip, like many she has taken around the world, provides a way for Dawa to educate others about Tibetan medicine. In a break from seeing patients in Berea, Dawa and Dechen sat down to educate *Berea College Magazine* readers about exactly what Tibetan medicine is.

While most of us have never heard of Tibetan medicine, it is not some “new age” way of healing. Tibetan medicine is a well-defined medical system with roots that date back to the fourth century. As early as the seventh century, Tibet was hosting its own medical conference, inviting physicians from India, China, and Persia. Tibetan doctors then fused the combined medical knowledge of each culture with their own indigenous Tibetan healing to solidify the Tibetan medical system.

Dechen describes Tibetan medicine as “the practice of healing, science, and art together.” The system is considered a holistic system, meaning that doctors like Dechen and Dawa spend as much time learning about a person’s daily routine as they do assessing vital signs.

# This story begins a long, long time ago in a distant foreign land. This is no fairy tale though. It is the story of an ancient healing tradition and how Tibetan medicine has recently made its way to Berea.

Tibetan medicine seeks to treat root causes — not symptoms. Patients, therefore, are advised to change factors in their lifestyle that may be disturbing the balance of their health. Changes in diet, work conditions, relationships, or daily environment may all be recommended depending on the diagnosed condition. For example, patients with arthritis may find themselves on an anti-inflammatory drug in the United States, but in the Tibetan system, Dawa says, they would likely find themselves diagnosed with “ill stomach disease,” whose cause she assesses as “eating the wrong kinds of food for a long time.” Thus, the patient would be prescribed, first and foremost, with a change in diet.

Only after these factors of lifestyle are addressed do practitioners consider, in more acute cases, treating symptoms through therapies like hot baths, massage, or the use of traditional Tibetan herbal remedies.

These herbal remedies come from the mountainous region around Tibet. Both Dechen and Dawa have made yearly trips to learn to identify plants and their uses as part of their medical training. The instillation of this herbal knowledge has been more challenging for the generations, that fled Tibet after the Chinese invasion of the country in 1959. Dawa was then only nine years old. She and her family, who farmed in the central region of Tibet, took refuge with other Tibetans in India. Many medical practitioners and teachers in Tibet were imprisoned by the Chinese. Most died in prison, and the majority of ancient healing texts were destroyed.

The Tibetan people were determined not to forget their culture, including their medical tradition. In 1961, three years

after entering exile, the Dalai Lama reestablished the Tibetan Medical Institute in India, which had thrived in Tibet since 1916. Dawa was among the first students to be accepted into the reestablished school.

“The teachers told us that Tibetan culture was being destroyed,” remembers Dawa, “and that one way to preserve it was through learning the Tibetan medical system.” Dawa took a placement exam offered to all Tibetan school children and gained entry into the school. After receiving a free education, Dawa has spent the 32 years since her graduation serving the Institute as a doctor, researcher, and global advocate for the Tibetan medical system.

Dechen says her mother’s life of learning and service has been a great inspiration. Since childhood, Dechen has learned about Tibetan medicine from her mother’s work, and her mother has also served as a great advisor in Dechen’s medical career. “If I don’t know about a patient’s condition, I always ask her,” says Dechen. “I can learn from her practice; at the same time I can explore my own mission.”

Dechen’s mission led her to Berea. While Dechen practiced Tibetan medicine for three years before coming to Berea, and while she remains deeply committed to its practice, she hopes to reach beyond the boundaries of that medical tradition. Classes such as physiology, nutrition, and anatomy offer her alternative perspectives on health. Though not completely different from the classes she took at the Institute, Dechen says certain aspects of the classes, like the details of the body learned in anatomy or the theories of psychology, are expanding and deepening

her practice. At present, she is considering a major in either nursing or in psychology.

Another reason Dechen came to Berea was to better her English. The Tibetan medical world frequently uses translators to share their knowledge with others, but translators often have no background in the field, and thus, may translate incorrectly. Dechen’s mother hopes that her daughter will be a “good resource for Tibet.”

This fall, Dechen also began learning about complementary and conventional health care through her student labor position with Berea’s local WaysMeet Healing Arts Center. WaysMeet gathers practitioners of integrative healing arts, including massage, acupuncture, counseling, and Qui Gong. Dechen will be supervised by Dr. Maureen Flannery. Dechen will coordinate Dr. Flannery’s community acupuncture clinic, receive patients, and help sessions to go smoothly. Dr. Flannery says she is “looking forward to learning about traditional Tibetan medicine from Dechen, while providing her with an opportunity to observe one approach to the integration of Eastern and Western medicine.”

Dechen is also excited about her new position. “Working with people is what I like,” says Dechen, especially, she notes, in a health care setting.

Dechen holds one of the most ancient healing traditions within her, and yet she is humbly open to the world around her. Extremely grateful for her opportunity to study at Berea, she happily maneuvers about campus, like any other student. One would never know she was a doctor in disguise.