

Researches on Poison, Garuḍa-birds and Nāga-serpents based on the *Sgrub thabs kun btus*

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Tibetan literature deals with poison in a number of texts, conveniently incorporated in the Tibetan *sādhana* (deity evocation) collection *Sgrub thabs kun btus*,¹ especially in Vols. Cha and Nya of the fourteen-volume set. Here the term for ‘poison’ (T. *dug*) has a range of usages and applications far exceeding what we could expect in Western conceptions, also far exceeding those found in Indian Buddhism itself. To differentiate the part due to the Indian heritage from what else is found in these Tibetan texts, whatever be the source, it is relevant to introduce numerical groups, namely, the three, the four, and the five kinds of poison. The threefold system does not implicate the Garuḍa-birds or Nāga-serpents. The system of four poisons, with a fifth one added, in terms of the four or five elements, goes with both the Garuḍa-birds and Nāga-serpents; and a secondary system of five poisons was found in a ‘lion-faced’ Dākini text.

The threefold set of poison

In an early, primitive paper I dealt with the Buddhist theory of poison, which stresses three psychological poisons—lust, hatred, and delusion (in Sanskrit, usually *rāga*, *dveṣa*, *moha*).² The Indian books on medicine, including Vāgbhaṭa’s *Aṣṭāṅgahrdayasaṃhitā*, which was translated into Tibetan along with a large commentary, set forth two kinds of natural poisons: ‘stable’ poison from the stationary realm, e.g. from roots of plants; and ‘mobile’ poison from the moving realm, e.g. from snakes among animals. The snake is a symbol for a kind of poison that moves toward the victim, as though in hatred; while one would go to a stationary poison, such as those in certain mushrooms, as though with delusion. But then there are some Buddhist texts with magical formulas to use against poisons; and in the commentarial tradition of the *Mahāmāyurī*, also in the Tibetan canon, I found a third poison added to the natural two.³ This is a category I would now translate as ‘concocted’ (the Sanskrit for *byas pa* probably *kṛta* or *kṛtaka*), e.g. the kind of poison a chemist makes, out of desire for some purpose, perhaps dreadful. The text in which the third kind was found also gives the mythological poison as an example,

namely the one called Hālāhala in the Purāṇic story of churning the ocean. Apparently the churning of the ocean to yield the poison is why one calls this kind of poison ‘concocted’. And if I am justified in associating the concoction of poison with ‘lust’, it follows that the three inner, or psychological poisons, are correlated with three outer ones. This is a typical way of thinking in the Buddhist Tantras, ‘as without so within’ (*yathā bāhyaṃ tathā ’dhyātmam iti*).⁴

So far it is purely Indian. To place the discussion on the Tibetan scene, I turn to the *Sgrub thabs kun btus*, Vol. 6 (Cha). A native ritual compendium around the Lord Vajrasattva (*bcom ldan ’das dpal rdo rje sems dpa’*) contains this verse:⁵

/ ’dod chags ’ze sdañ gti mug gsum /
 / de dag ’jig rten dug gsum ste /
 / bcom ldan sañs rgyas dug mi mña’ /
 / sañs rgyas gzi yis dug bcom mo //

Those three—lust, hatred, delusion—are
 the three poisons of the world. The Buddha
 Bhagavat does not carry the poison. The Buddha’s
 brightness destroys the poison.

After alluding to the possibility of getting rid of the poison by the example of the Buddha, the text tells what a performer should do to attempt the same. After various ritual formulas, he should say:

/ sa ni dug gi ma yin te /
 / sa ni dug gi pha yañ yin /
 / bden pa’i bden tshig ’di dag gis /
 / tshe ’das dug ni dug med śog //

Earth is the mother of poison. Earth is
 the father of poison. By these (two) true
 words of truth, may the poison of the past
 become non-poison!

And adds

/ dug ni sa yi nañ du soñ /
 / gañ ba’i snod du dug soñ žig svāhā /

May the poison pass into the earth. May the
 poison pass into the full vessel! Svāhā.

The formula is repeated, substituting the words, ‘water,’ ‘fire,’ ‘wind’. The *Sgrub thabs kun btus*, Vol 5 (Ca) has a similar statement in a Bhaiṣajyaguru

(healing Buddha) ritual:⁶

Oṃ. Homage to the Lord. May I, named so-and-so, a defiled person in the passage of time destroying all the obscuration of poison—become possessed of the three virtues. This earth is the father of poison. This earth is the mother of poison. By these true words of truth, may the three poisons pass into the earth.

And again, one repeats with substitution of words for the other three elements. Notice here the difference, or at least clarification, that the three poisons are to be converted into virtues. Now, this talk about ‘mother of poison’ and ‘father of poison’ has a definite non-Buddhist aura. In order to make it more Buddhist, one may bring in the theory of the four goddesses who are the purity of the four elements. This is what a ritual on the deity Śrī-Vajrabhairava in a different ritual collection (probably Gelugpa) tries to do, at the same time clarifying the ‘full vessel’.⁷ For earth the statement is this:

Earth is the mother of poison, and earth is the father of poison. By these true words of truth, may poison of past time become non-poison. May the poison pass into the earth; may the poison pass into the full vessel. Svāhā.

This is followed by a prayer that the performer may attain the nature of (the goddess) Locanā, the purity of the earth element no matter what the earth poison. The statement using the word ‘water’ goes with the goddess Māmakī, the purity of the water element no matter what the water poison; and “‘may the poison pass into the ‘moist vessel’ (*gśer ba’i snod*).” The statement using the word ‘fire’ goes with the goddess Pāṇḍarā, the purity of the fire element no matter what the fire poison; and “‘may the poison pass into the ‘hot vessel’ (*tsha ba’i snod*).” The statement using the word ‘wind’ goes with the goddess Samaya-Tārā, the purity of the wind element no matter what the wind poison; and “‘may the poison pass into the ‘swinging vessel’ (*g’yo ba’i snod*).”

In the foregoing, to get rid of the three psychological poisons by rendering them non-poison, the performer uses the four elements.

Garuḍa-birds and poison

In the mythology, the Garuḍa is the enemy of serpents, who are associated with poison. The basic text in *Sgrub thabs kun btus*, Vol.8 (Nya) is an evocation of the Khyuñ-khra (Garuḍa-falcon), which includes this bowing verse:⁸

/ brtan dañ g’yo ba’i dug mams kun /
 / me dañ chu bžin ’joms mdsad pa /
 / rigs lña ye śes lña yi dños /

/ mkha' ldiñ khyod la phyag 'tshad bstod //

I bow, praising you, Garuḍa, who destroys like the fire and water, all the poisons of the stationary and the moving; who is the living presence (*dhos*) of the five families and the five wisdoms.

This tradition uses the symbolism of 'fire' and 'water' for elimination of the poisons.⁹ There are many such passages in these texts. For a water example, an earlier text of Vol. 8 (Nya) has:¹⁰

/ rañ byuñ ye śes sems ñid chus /
/ dug lña dug gsum dri ma bkru /

(May) the water of true consciousness, the self-arisen wisdom, wash (away) the five poisons and the three poisons!

For the fire, the fierce method, an example is apparently the "tongue of *yakṣa* flame" (*ya-kṣa me dbal*).¹¹ The fire and water thus go with the two kinds of poison, the stationary and the mobile of the Indian medical texts. Indian Buddhist texts also make this division, calling them the stationary (*acara*) and the moving (*cara*).¹² The fire of the stationary is in a place. Water, by flowing, goes with the moving. The next Garuḍa text regards the fire and water as requiring 'ransoming,' since it mentions various items that can be offered for the purpose and says, 'one offers this ransom (*glud*) for the pair fire and water' (*me chu dag gi glud 'di 'bul*).¹³

Then the five kinds of Garuḍa may well be a replacement of the five kinds of *Ḍākinī* found in the Mahāmāyā-maṇḍala of the *maṇḍala* compendium *Niṣpannayogāvalī*,¹⁴ as in this comparison:

Sugata-Garuḍa	Buddha-Ḍākinī
Vajra-Garuḍa	Vajra-Ḍākinī
Ratna-Garuḍa	Ratna-Ḍākinī
Padma-Garuḍa	Padma-Ḍākinī
Karma-Garuḍa	Viśva-Ḍākinī

The comparison is justified, because the *Ḍākinī* is understood as the 'sky-walker' hence agrees with the high-flying bird. 'Sugata' is a title of the Buddha. The Mahāmāyā-maṇḍala includes Viśva-Ḍākinī in the Amogha-siddhi family, which is usually called the Karma family.

The passage in the first Garuḍa text presents correspondences to each Garuḍa by way of bowing, thus:¹⁵ "I bow to Sugata-Garuḍa, who is the nature of Dharmadhātu wisdom, who has overcome the poisons arising from delusion by purification of earth." The text then abbreviates. Next, Vajra-Garuḍa, Mirror-like Wisdom (*ādarśa-jñāna*), poisons arising from hatred '

purification of water. Ratna-Garuḍa, Sameness Wisdom (*samatā-j.*), poisons arising from greed, by purification of space. Padma-Garuḍa, Discriminative Wisdom (*pratyavekṣaṇā-j.*), poisons arising from lust, by purification of fire. Karma-Garuḍa, Procedure-of-Duty Wisdom (*krtyānuṣṭhāna-j.*), poisons arising from envy, by purification of wind. Thus, the text routinely mentions the five elements for countering the five poisons, while claiming that ‘fire’ and ‘water’ suffice in actual practice.

The text shows how to arrange the Garuḍa group in directions:¹⁶ In the middle, the white Buddha-Garuḍa. E. the blue Vajra-Garuḍa. S. the yellow Ratna-Garuḍa. W. the red Padma-Garuḍa. N. the green Karma-Garuḍa.

It is clear from the above that the elements are the standard four, augmented by the fifth called ‘space’ (*ākāśa*). Space is the pervading one. But this points to the curious nature of the correspondences, because the space correspondence goes with the ‘Sameness Wisdom’ which makes sense for seeing all natures the same. However, the one put in the middle is expectedly the Buddha-Garuḍa; but this goes with purification of earth.¹⁷

Independent of the element correspondences is a list of five poisons in an evocation of the Dākinī ‘Lion-faced’; and as the correspondence of the Garuḍa to the Dākinī was pointed out above, it does not seem amiss to introduce the list here without making a special section for it. This fascinating list is:¹⁸ ‘poison of seeing’ (*mthoṅ ba’i dug*), ‘poison of touch’ (*reg pa’i dug*), ‘poison of exhaling’ (*kha rlaṅs kyi dug*), ‘poison of feeling’ (*tshor ba’i dug*), ‘poison of expectation’ (*bsam pa’i dug*). This set has profound implications. Thus, ‘poison of seeing’ appears to be the belief in the evil eye to harm or sicken at a distance; and perhaps also the ability of certain creatures to paralyze their prey by staring at them. ‘Poison of touch’ shows a belief in the spread of disease by such contact as hand-shaking. ‘Poison of exhaling’ suggests the mythology of the dragon; and perhaps also contagion through the breath. ‘Poison of feeling’ suggest mass hysteria and mob on the loose; and perhaps it is a belief in psychosomatic influence as the corrosive character of some feelings. ‘Poison of expectation’ where the Tibetan word *bsam pa* is equivalent to Sanskrit words *cintā*, *abhipraya*, *āśaya*, could well be what the Greeks referred to (in translation) as ‘disorder of the soul,’ and called ‘folly’ which was of two kinds, madness and stupidity.¹⁹

A large garuḍa-bird text has a generous exposition of treating poison.²⁰ It is too technical to cover adequately here; and I shall restrict myself to a few observations. It starts, ‘Here is the counsel of the multi-colored diamond Garuḍa for curing poison . . . Here there are three parts: 1) method of examination, 2) method of remedy, 3) after-deeds.’ Under method of examination, it says, referring to poison generally:²¹ if cast in tea, it debilitates the sight-organ (*chaṅ la btab na mig la’o*); If cast in meat or fat, it debilitates the smell-organ (*śa’am snum la btab na sna la’o*); if cast in whites, i.e. milk products, it

tates the hearing organ (*rtsam par btab na rna ba la'o*). (the text omits a remark for touch.) Later, under remedy, the text states that it will tell what to do if the poison has afflicted one of the five sense organs:²² If it afflicts the eye, one averts it with a liquid mixture of tiger bone (*mig la babs nal stag gi rus pa'i sman mar*); if it afflicts the tongue, of parrot (bone) (*lce la ne tso'i*); if it afflicts the nostrils, of wolf (bone) (*sna la sbyaṅ ki'i*); if the ear, of vulture (bone) (*rna ba la bya rgod kyi*). (Again, the text omits a remark for touch).

Before passing to the topic of Nāgas, I should briefly refer to that part of the legend of Garuḍa that pertains to the present discussion. Once Garuḍa was intent on making off with the pot of *amṛta* (ambrosia) guarded by two monstrous serpents who never closed their eyes. Whoever they looked at with those eyes would be poisoned to death. (The poison eyes are referred to above). Garuḍa blinded those eyes by raising a dust storm with his wings.²³

Nāga-serpents and poison

The topic of serpents and poison involves an extensive body of literature. The life of Śākyamuni, the founder of Buddhism, has important elements of snakes for which he had a sense of affiliation, even affection—whether or not one calls it the mythological overlay—and which afforded him shade as in the episode of the serpent Mucilinda. A scholar named Vogel devoted a large chapter to this topic in his admirable book on the serpent lore of India.²⁴

The text especially used here is in the *Sgrub thabs kun btus*, Vol. 6 (Cha), an evocation (*sgrub thabs*) of Lokeśvara Siṃhanāda, a form of Avalokiteśvara. So far I have no information on whether the name 'Siṃhanāda' (lion's roar) is implicated; previously, the list of five poisons ('poison of seeing,' etc.) was taken from a 'Lion-faced' Ḍākinī evocation—this might simply be a coincidence. Before going to the material to be extracted from that Vol. 6 text, some general information is necessary.

In relating eight serpents to the four elements, we can find an Indian antecedent. Thus, Celupā's commentary on the *Guhyasamājantra*, Chap. XV, verse 103, mentions that the expression 'various snakes (*sarpa*)' means snakes of water, snakes of the wind, as well as ones of various colors.²⁵ This generalizes the theory of snakes to go with the elements, but not necessarily like the European lore of gnomes of earth, undines of water, salamanders of fire, and sylphs of wind. This is because the Indian, and here the Tibetan, symbolism of the snake regards it as the carrier of poison. It should be noticed though, that the usual survey-type book, such as the one on animals by Sen, associates the snake just with water, particularly with rain.²⁶

Indeed, the nine great Nāgas are worshipped to this day in Nepal to produce rain. Varuṇa, white, is in the center; Ananta, dark blue, in the east; Padmaka, color of a lotus-stalk, in the south; Takṣaka, saffron-colored, in the west;

Vāsuki, greenish, in the north; Śāṅkhapāla, yellowish, in the south-west; Kulika, white colored, in the north-west; Mahāpadma, gold-colored, in the north-east. Last to be pulled onto the eight-petalled lotus was Karkoṭaka, blue in color, hence in the south-east. These nine are in fact the ones of our Tibetan text, which therefore suggests a Nepalese provenance for these theories.²⁷

The Nāgas were routinely put in the eight directions in late Indian literature, as in the *Bhaviṣya Purāṇa*: Ananta in the East, Vāsuki in the North-East, Takṣaka in the South, Karkoṭaka in the South-East, Padmanāga in the West, Mahāpadma in the South-West, Śāṅkhapāla in the North, and Gadā-padma in the North-West.²⁸ Because *nāga* also means ‘elephant’, eventually this association of *Nāgas* with directions became the ‘elephant of the direction’. Thus, now we do not know whether the celebrated Buddhist logician’s name Dignāga means ‘elephant of the direction’ or ‘serpent of the direction’.

The colors differ for the eight Nāgas in an *Ucchuṣmajambhala-sādhana* in the *Sādhana-māla*, 577.11,f. Ananta blue (*nīla*); Takṣaka red (*rakta*); Mahāpadma white (*dhavala*); Karkoṭaka dark blue (*śyama*); Vāsuki white (*śukla*); Padma, color of lovely Jasmine; Śāṅkhapāla yellow (*pita*); Kulika purple-spotted (*dhūmābhakarbura*). But these serpents, and also when they are involved in the tantric *maṇḍala* rite of determining the place to dig, are not apparently associated with the four elements in the manner of our text.

As to the names, the eight Nāgas are the first eight in the Buddhist dictionary *Mahāvīyutpatti* chapter on names of the Nāgarājas (Serpent Kings). The names from mantras and Tibetan as found in our text, however, are as follows: Vāsuki (T. *nor rgyas*); Śāṅkhapāla (T. *duñ skyoñ*); Ananta (T. *dga’ bo*); Kulika (T. *rīgs ldan*); Padma (T. *pad-ma*); Takṣaka (T. *’jog po*); Mahāpadma (T. *bde chen*); Karkoṭaka (T. *stobs rgyu*). The serpent Ananta has the official Tibetan translation Mtha’-yas. The name Dga’-ba here found reflects the Sanskrit Nanda, name of a celebrated Nāga important in the Buddha legend. This indicates a one-time confusion between the names Ananta and Nanda by pronunciation similarity. The name Mahāpadma has the official Tibetan translation Pad-ma-chen-po. The name Bde-chen (‘great joy’) here found is possibly an epithet for ‘lotus’ (*padma*), since the word *padma* is always transcribed into Tibetan letters, never translated. Finally, the leader of the eight Nāgas is Varuṇa (T. *chu lha*). In a Sanskrit praise of Varuṇa, this deity is described with ‘form of Nāga (*nāgarūpa*).²⁹

Now we have the necessary background for initially citing our text:³⁰

Vāsuki and Śāṅkhapāla of the Kṣatriya caste are yellow, and control earth. Ananta and Kulika of the Brahmin caste, are white and control water. Padma and Takṣaka of the Vaiśya caste are red and control fire. Mahāpadma and Karkoṭaka of the Śūdra caste are blue and control wind. And they overcome all poisons of those (elements). Their leader

Varuṇa has the nature of the element space (*ākāśa*) . . . If one has not clearly determined the poison, he should recite the Varuṇa (formula). He performs the yoga of Siṃhanāda, honors the Buddhas, makes *bali* offerings to the *Nāgarājas*. Having offered, honored, and praised, he should clearly visualize a white serpent on a trident; and recite as much as is necessary: OM PHUḤ VARUṆĀYA NĀGARĀJA PHUḤ HŪM PHAṬ. Then, when one has clearly determined the poison, one should recite the earth for wind poison; the fire for earth poison; the water for fire poison; and the wind for water poison.

Later in the text,³¹ we read that the poison of earth is heavy and lying in wait (*lci źiñ 'thibs pa*); the poison of water is cool and chilling (*grañ źiñ bsil pa*); the poison of fire is hot and rapacious (*tsha źiñ sred pa*); the poison of wind is light and sneaking (*yañ źiñ g'yo ba*). With the assumption that the two terms used for each element poison go respectively with the two serpents of an individual element, I studied the Tibetan words to arrive at such renditions as 'cool and chilling' to go with the mild and fierce ones of the serpent pair.

The continuation of the Tibetan text shows what is meant by reciting the earth for wind poison, etc. It involves the well-known astrological theory of elements, namely that water and earth are concordant, and wind and fire concordant, while the two sets are mutually incompatible. Hence the red fire is used to overcome earth; and earth's friend, the white water, overcomes fire. Fire's friend, the blue wind, overcomes the water; and the yellow earth overcomes, i.e. stops, the wind. So the text says:³²

Hence, if one has clearly determined the poison, one should recite the mantra to oppose the respective one. If it is a case of earth poison, one recites the mantra of fire, to wit: For the duration of the self-evocation, one imagines himself as Siṃhanāda with a bright trident, on which the two red serpents (i.e. Padma and Takṣaka) are joined. He recites the heart mantra of Siṃhanāda, and OM PADMĀYA NĀGARĀJA PHUḤ HŪM PHAṬ SVĀHĀ. Similarly, when it is a matter of a water poison, the blue serpents (Mahāpadma and Karkoṭaka) are joined on the trident and (in the middle) MAHĀPADMĀYA KARKOṬĀYA, with mantra introduction and conclusion as before. In the case of the fire poison one joins the two white serpents (Ananta and Kulika) using (in the middle) the mantra ANANTĀYA KULIKĀYA. For the wind poison one joins the yellow serpents (Vāsuki and Śaṅkhapāla) with the mantra (in the middle) VĀSUKĀYA ŚAṅKHAPĀLĀYA. If one cannot determine the poison, then it is said, "Varuṇa is the chief one who destroys all those (i.e. poisons). The elements have the nature of the sky. Hence, recite this one assiduously." So one contemplates a white serpent on the trident; and after reciting the heart mantra of the Lord, one recites a

hundred thousand times OM PHUḤ VARUṆĀYA NĀGARĀJA PHUḤ
HŪM PHAṬ SVĀHĀ, and then he clearly determines the poison.

Notice that pairs of serpents intertwined, but kept apart,³³ on the caduceus (here, the trident), symbolize the God of Healing.³⁴ The two serpents in each case are indicated in the mantra by the concluding syllables HŪM PHAṬ SVĀHĀ, of which in the theory of Buddhist mantra, the HŪM PHAṬ is the fierce male mantra and SVĀHĀ is the mild female mantra.³⁵ This confirms that one of the serpent pair represents the fierce, the other the mild, as was mentioned above in connection with the two kinds of poison for each element. The syllable PHUḤ seems to be a special mantra used for snakes.

The first pair mentioned is the two red serpents Padma and Takṣaka which control fire. According to Vogel, Takṣaka is “poisonous, fierce, and relentless” so he would have the rapacious kind of fire poison. Besides, the *Atharva-Veda* referred to him as Takṣaka Vaiśāleya, which may be a reason for putting him in the Vaiśya caste.³⁶ Assuming that Padma has the alternate forms Padmaka and Padmanāga, he is said to be virtuous, hence has the mild kind of poison, called simply ‘hot’.³⁷

Next, the two blue serpents Mahāpadma and Karkoṭaka which control wind. Karkoṭaka had a human body with snake tail, and was ashamed of his deformity,³⁸ according to another legend he is the spokesman for the obedient Nāgas,³⁹ so would belong to the Śūdra class. He presumably has the sneaking kind of wind poison. Mahāpadma is also a Nāga with human face; he can appear in a dream to direct a person to places of buried treasure,⁴⁰ so should have the light kind of wind poison.

The two white serpents Ananta and Kulika control water. Vogel identifies Ananta with Śeṣa, the world-serpent who supports the reclining Vishnu.⁴¹ Since his mind delighted in righteousness, this agrees with the placement in the Brahmin class, and suggests the mild kind of water poison, simply cool. Vogel provides little description of Kulika, who presumably has the fierce kind of water poison, the chilling.

Finally, there are the two yellow serpents Vāsuki and Śaṅkhapāla, who control earth. Vāsuki is very popular in the legends. He presides over the Nether World and is the guardian spirit of the house, which is consistent with his control over earth in our text. As the ruler of the Nāga city Bhogavatī, Vāsuki is reasonably called Kṣatriya. In the myth of churning the ocean, Vāsuki was made the churning rope, implicating a base in the oceanic floor.⁴² The churning produced the fierce poison Hālāhala, so I take Vāsuki’s earth poison to be the fierce kind, the lying in wait. Śaṅkhapāla is the hero of a Jātaka where he exhibits extraordinary forbearance, which goes with earth. Śaṅkha as a treasure goes with the treasure-bearing nature of earth. The story (from the *Divyāvadāna*) that Śaṅkha is the name of a future king whose reli-

gious counselor named Brahmāyu will be father of the future Buddha Maitreya, agrees with placement in the Kṣatriya class.⁴³ Śaṅkha's poison would therefore be the mild kind—earth poison called 'heavy'.

In summary of the conclusions this table is offered:

	<i>With mild poison</i>	<i>With fierce poison</i>
Earth	Śaṅkhapāla (heavy)	Vāsuki (lying in wait)
Water	Ananta (cool)	Kulika (chilling)
Fire	Padma (hot)	Takṣaka (rapacious)
Wind	Mahāpadma (light)	Karkoṭaka (sneaking)

Besides, our previous citations of water as the father of poison and as the mother of poison—the same said of the other three elements—seem to agree if we take “mother of poison” to represent the mild poison, and “father of poison” to represent the fierce poison.

The role of Varuṇa as the Nāga of final resort, if one is unable to determine the poison among the four elements, the text justifies, saying “the elements have the nature of the sky,” so Varuṇa's ‘ocean’ is space. This shows that the elements are frequently imperceptible, since the text said, “If one has not clearly determined the poison, he should recite the Varuṇa (formula);” and then, in the course of his *samādhi* on a white serpent and pronouncing the mantra many times, he manages eventually to determine the poison. For this reason, this theory of each element bearing specific poisons cannot be the basis of a school of medicine. In comparison, the theory of Philistion of Locri followed by the Italian and Sicilian school,⁴⁴ held that disease is due to the four elements each having a power: fire the hot, air the cold, water the moist, earth the dry. Notice that only for fire the hot, do the attributions to the elements agree with the poison descriptions of our Tibetan text. Indeed, in the case of hot, cold, moist, dry, these are acknowledged to be perceptible qualities.⁴⁵ Hence, even though Buddhism holds that the body is formed of the four elements (the *mahābhūta*) and their derivatives (*bhautika*), a theory of poison in the four elements as causes of disease would not be practicable as a school of medicine. One can only teach on the basis of perceptible qualities.

At variance with the element correspondence to the eight great serpents is the case in the commentary ascribed to Buddhaguhya on the *Sarvadurga-tipariśodhana-tantra* which has a *maṇḍala* of the eight:⁴⁶

Ananta and Kulika of the Brahmin clan arise from fire, and are white. Vāsuki and Śaṅkhapāla of the Kṣatriya clan arise from earth, and are yellow. Takṣaka and Mahāpadma of the Vāisya clan arise from wind, and are red. Karkotaka and Padma of the Śūdra clan arise from water, and are black.

The only pair in complete agreement is Vāsuki and Śaṅkhapāla. This text switches Padma and Mahāpadma with their paired serpent. While the color

schemes agree (except for Padma and Mahāpadma, as mentioned), the attributed element for three of the pairs differs from our previous data. In contrast, Buddhaguhya, in his great commentary on the *Vairocanābhisaṃbodhi-tantra*, Chap. III, states, in agreement with our previous data, that gods of yellow color go with the earth-*maṇḍala*; of white color with the water-*maṇḍala*; of red color with the fire-*maṇḍala*; of blue or black color with the wind-*maṇḍala*.⁴⁷ The above-mentioned commentary on the *Sarvadurgatipariśodhana-tantra* then puts these eight serpents on eight petals of a lotus with Vajrapāṇi in the center, and treats the symbolism of the ‘poison’. The previous procedure amounted to applying an incompatible poison to counteract a poison, thus presumably to ‘detoxicate’ it, rendering it a non-poison. This commentary adopts the principle of ‘extraction’ of poison from the Tantra itself, indicated by the Tibetan term *drañ* for this process. The Tantra is cited, ‘he draws out (*drañ*) by hand, reciting *phud* (= *phuḥ*), every last bit of the poisons’ (*dug rnam s thams cad ma lus par/ phud ces bya ba’ i lag pas drañ*).⁴⁸ This commentary goes on to mention the very system of incompatible poisons that I presented above, and presumably intends the result to be an extraction rather than a detoxification, maintaining the symbolism of extracting the poison from the serpent fangs.

Thus, two procedures are possible—extracting or neutralizing. The business of extraction appears to agree with early Buddhism, which stressed the elimination of unvirtuous natures (*akuśala-dharma*) and of the defilements (*kleśa*) generally. The theory of neutralizing the poison agrees more with the later Tantra position that one does not really get rid of anything, so best restore it to the pristine condition; do not get rid of the poison: convert it to non-poison.

May I briefly refer to the association of the Nāga Śaṅkhapāla with the ant-hill. Vogel reports from the *Śaṅkhapāla-jātaka* that the Bodhisattva in his birth as a Nāga proceeded to the world of men, and lying down upon an ant-hill, vowed that anyone wanting any part of his body is welcome to it.⁴⁹ It is therefore pertinent to mention the Buddhist ‘Discourse on the Anthill’ (*Majjhima-Nikāya*, No. 23). In this scripture (*Vammikasutta*), various items are dug up from the ant-hill, finally at the bottom a Nāga. When asked, the Buddha gave symbolic meanings to each item, finally saying for the Nāga that it represents a monk whose fluxes (*S. āsrava*) are eliminated, and who should be revered. This agrees perfectly with the attribution to Śaṅkhapāla of the ‘heavy’ poison, because ‘heavy’ is the meaning of the Sanskrit word *guru*, teacher of the disciples.

Finally, we should recall that the offerings to serpents were made especially for their help in getting rain. It is appropriate therefore to mention the rain sequence of the elements according to the *Kālacakra-tantra* exegesis *Vimalaprabhā*.⁵⁰ When Csoma de Kőrös introduced Western scholars to this

fascinating system in 1833 he referred to it as a “peculiar religious system,”⁵¹ and this rain sequence is certainly peculiar. Here, arising from the void are the wind atoms, as a course of motion. Then by their friction as accompaniment, arise the fire atoms, i.e. lightning. Next, attended with wind and fire, arise the water atoms, i.e. rain. Then, holding the rain, arise the earth atoms, along with a rainbow in the sky. The atoms of ‘taste’ pervade them all, hence ‘space’ (*ākāśa*).

Regretfully I must take leave of the topic, without having done sufficient justice to the rich lore of serpents.

NOTES

1. I gave a report on this collection at the XXIXe Congrès international des Orientalistes, Paris, Juillet 1973 (Section organisée par Ariane Macdonald); cf. *Études tibétaines* (L’Asiathèque, 1976), pp. 87-89. The collection was made by the Sa-skya-pa sect.
 2. “The concept of poison in Buddhism.” *Oriens*, 10:1, 1957, pp. 107-109.
 3. In the *Mahāmāyūrividyārājñīsūtraśatasahasraṭīkā-nāma*, Derge Tanjur, Rgyud, Du, f. 191b-7.
 4. Abhayākara Gupta’s *Niṣpannayogāvalī*, ed. by B. Bhattacharyya (Baroda, 1949), p. 4.
 5. The work is: *Bcom ldan ’das dpal rdo rje sems dpa’i bsñen sgrub phrin las dañ bcas pa’i yi ge dños grub ’dod ’jo*, Vol. 6 (Ca); passage at no.f. 231-5,6,7.
 6. The passage in Vol 5. (ca) is at no.f. 218.
 7. The *Rnam par rgyal ba’i grva tshañ phan bde legs bśad gliñ ’dus sde’i źal ’don gyi rim pa phyogs sdebs*; library edition, 1977, Lib. of Congress I-Tib. 77-906334, 3-vols. (rituals of the Potala and the Dalai Lamas); my copy, paper, Spring 1970. The particular text is: *Dpal rdo rje ’jigs byed kyi źi rgyas dbañ drag gi sbyin sreg dañ gśin po’i sbyañ chog bcas*, fol. 18a-b.
 8. *Khyuñ khra’i sgrub thabs las tshogs rjes gnañ dañ bcas pa*, no.f. 141-3.
 9. This reminds us of the ‘Miracles of the Pairs’ which Gautama Buddha according to legend exhibited at the city of Sāvathī, when both flame and water issued from his body, since with the present information we can associate these elements with the realms of the stationary and the moving; cf. Edward J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (New York, 1952), pp. 98-99.
 10. *Bla ma źi ba gsañ ba ’dus pa’i gźuñ rtsa ba phrin las cha lag dañ bcas pa’i skor*, no.f. 47-7.
 11. Vol. 8 (Nya), *Gu ru drag dmar ñañ lugs ’briñ po me’i spu gri’i sgrub rjes man ñag*, no.f. 132-5,6.
 12. Cf. Prajñākaramati’s commentary on *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Chap. IX, 127: cause (*kāraṇa*) of the moving (*cara*) and stationary (*acara*) world. This distinction is necessary for the lay and monk Buddhist prohibition against killing, since this sin is directed toward the ‘moving’, not toward the ‘stationary’ world of vegetables and so on.
 13. The *Bcom ldan ’das rdo rje khyuñ khra’i sgrub thabs las tshogs rjes gnañ dañ bcas pa’i skor*, Vol. 8 (Nya), no.f. 183-6. The word *dag* can mean ‘pure’, but here I take it as the sign of the dual.
 14. *Niṣpannayogāvalī* (n.4, above), introduction, p. 43.
 15. *Khyuñ khra* (n.8, above), no.f. 141-1,2,3.
 16. *Ibid.* (n.8, above), no.f. 151-3.
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17. The correspondences of elements to poisons is of a more expected nature in A.H. Francke, "gZer myig. A book of the Tibetan Bonpos," *Asia Major*, 1924, p. 309:

In some beings hatred burns like fire,
In others, lust circulates like water,
In some, ignorance rages like darkness,
In others, envy grows as if [planted in the] soil,
In some, pride whirls like the wind.

18. Vol.8 (Nya), *Mkha' 'gro señge'i gdoñ pa can gyi man ñag zab mo*, no.f. 278-4,5.
19. For the Greek theory, cf. Francis M. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology* (New York, 1957), p. 346.
20. *Rdo rje khyuñ khra* (n.13, above), no.f. 184-4, ff.
21. *Ibid.* no.f. 184-6.
22. *Ibid.* no.f. 188-7.
23. Vettam Mani, *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia* (Delhi, 1975), p. 282.
24. J. Ph. Vogel, *Indian Serpent-Lore, or the Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art* (Delhi, 1972), the large chapter II (pp. 93-131).
25. Japanese photo. edn. of Tibetan Peking canon (PTT), Vol. 63, p. 215-3-6: /sbrul mams sna tshogs pa la źes pa ni chu sbrul dañ/ rluñ sbrul dañ/ kha dog tha dad pa'i sbrul mams bsdu'o/.
26. Asis Sen, *Animal Motifs in Ancient Indian Art* (Calcutta, 1972), p. 48.
27. Vogel, *Indian Serpent-Lore*, pp. 226-227.
28. *Bhaviṣya-purāṇa*, Sanskrit with Marathi translation (Chap. 1 by Rāśivaḍekāra; Chap. 2-3 by Bāpaṭa) [n.p. 1909], Chap. 1, p. 162-3; no. lines 75-82.
29. Cf. Sylvain Levi, *Sanskrit Texts from Bāli* (Baroda, 1933), p. 54, in *Varuṇastava*: "oh you with form of Nāga" (*nāgarūpa*).
30. *Sgrub thabs kun btus*, Vol. 6 (Cha), the 'Jig rten dbañ phyug señ ge sgra' i sgrub thabs rjes gañ las tshogs dañ bcas pa, no.f. 496-1, ff.
31. 'Jig rten dbañ phyug, no.f. 513-4,5.
32. *Ibid.*, no.f. 513-5 to 514-3.
33. Cf. Sen, *Animal Motifs*, p. 53, "heads facing each other entwined in amorous embrace." Thus, the heads of the mild and fierce pair are kept apart.
34. That the Greek god of healing Asklepios should be represented in Tibet is not surprising; cf. Christopher I. Beckwith, "The Introduction of Greek Medicine into Tibet in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 99.2 (1979) (also, Indiana University Research Institute for Inner Asian Studies, Reprint Series 40), pp. 297-313. For other Greek influences—granted that some may have come from India as intermediary—cf. Alex Wayman, *The Buddhist Tantras; Light on Indo-Tibetan Esotericism* (New York, 1973), pp. 21-23, mentioning the four Aristotelian causes, as well as attribution of functions to corporeal centers in a manner comparable to Greco-Roman concepts. The theory of the four elements as compatible and incompatible is part of Greek astrology which was introduced to India at the time of the ancient 'Silk Road' (c. 100 B.C. to 200 A.D.).
35. Cf. Alex Wayman, "The Significance of Mantras, from the Veda down to Buddhist Tantric Practice," *Brahmavidyā; the Adyar Library Bulletin*, XXXIX, 1975, pp. 72-73; or in the somewhat altered form of the same title, *Indologica Taurinensia*, Vol. III-IV (1975-76), pp. 487-488.
36. Vogel, *Indian Serpent-Lore*, p. 203.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 227.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 214,n.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.
41. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-193.
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42. *Ibid.*, pp. 198-9, 201.
 43. *Ibid.*, pp. 215-216.
 44. Cornford, *Plato's Cosmology*, pp. 333-334.
 45. Cf. David E. Hahm, *The Origins of Stoic Cosmology* (Ohio State University Press, 1977), p. 37.
 46. Tibetan Tanjur (PTT), Vol. 76, p. 38-5-1,2. The colors are quite different from those attributed to the Nāgas in Vajravarmaṇ's commentary, as reported in Tadeusz Skorupski, ed. and tr., *The Sarvadurgatipariśodhana Tantra* (Delhi, 1983), p. 57.
 47. Tibetan Tanjur (PTT), Vol. 77, p. 159-2-6,7.
 48. This is taken by the commentator from what Skorupski calls 'Version A' of the Tantra; cf. his p. 346.7-8.
 49. Vogel, *Indian Serpent-Lore*, p. 134.
 50. Collected Works of Bu-ston (initial volumes devoted to the *Kālacakra*), Vol. Ka, *Khams Le* (of *Vimalaprabhā*), fol. 63a-6, ff.
 51. Csoma de Kőrös, "Note on the Origin of the Kāla-Chakra and Ādi-Buddha Systems," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, Vol. II, 1833, pp. 57-59.
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APPENDIX

A Bon-po Passage on Poison

A.H. Francke did not complete the translation on the *Gzer myig* in his serial translation efforts (*Asia Major*, 1924, 1926, 1927, 1928, and [posthumously] 1949). I possess in paper the part labelled (headless script) *Mdo gzer mig gi smad kyi po-ti-ka* (second part of the *Gzer mig*). The first work here is entitled: *Mkha' 'gro gsañ gcod kyi dug phyuñ ñaṅ tshan khru ba sor ra ba* (The bathing Śarabha, the natural order of extracting poison that is the Dākini's secret 'cutting').

/dañ po dug phyuñ la rdsas kun bsags pa
'di skad do/
kyai dañ po dug phyuñ gañ nas byuñ/
dug gi pha ni gnam yañ yin/
dug gi ma ni sa yañ yin/
gnam sa rdsu 'phrul ldebs pa la/
bu ni dug nag spun dgu srid//
sa dug boñ ña rdo dug mkhar sgoñ dañ/
chu dug btsa' khu śiñ dug sdag ma dañ/
rtsa dug re lcags ldum dug thañ phrom
dañ/
gser dug ra gan dñul dug źa ñe dañ//
btsan dug boñ ña nag po 'di mams kyis/
yi dam lha dañ sruñ ma'i tshogs/
lha btsan dgra lha zo dor dañ/
skañ rdsas sgrub rdsas mchod rdsas dañ/
pho brañ sgrub khañ sñas mams dañ/
dme yug nal dañ sna phyi'i than/
thab gźob mkhon 'dre źugs pa dañ/
rgyu chuñ phud ñams lhag śor 'gal 'khrul
dañ/
sme mnol ñams grib ci soñ ba/
dug phyuñ chag bsal sbran phud do/
sgrub gśen yon bdag 'khor bcas kyis/
mi gtsañ ñams sgrub byañ gyur cig//

Here is told the compilation of substances in regard to the primordial extraction of poison. Hail, the primordial extirpation of poison, wherever it arose. The father of poison is the sky. The mother of poison is the earth. The magic of sky and earth quakes, and gives rise to the nine brother sons of black poison, namely:

1. Poison of soil is aconite. 2. Poison of stone is metallic grains. 3. Poison of water is birth fluid. 4. Poison of tree is parasite vine. 5. Poison of herbs (*rtsva*) is the shrub Daphne. 6. Poison of orchard is the tough shrub. 7. Poison of gold is brass. 8. Poison of silver is lead. 9. Poison of the powerful is the donkey.

On account of these black ones, there are tutelary deities, the host of protective deities, the deities called Lha btsan and Dgra lha, fasting; the substances for the rite, for the accomplishing, for the offering; palaces, meditation halls, the ancients. Should there occur, sleeping on dirty sheets, earlier or later crime; ill-will as a burning hearth, demonic possession, feeble or cast-out wandering; escape of mental faculties, erratic conduct; weakness through infection; or darkening of mind—one should extract the poison, cast out the fragments, get rid of the occasion. May the Gshen of the 'work' purify the unclean and the obscuration of mind, of the patron along with his followers!

The end.
