





## FOLK KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY

Folk Knowledge and Indigenous Technology is one of the most important cultural heritages of Bhutan. It plays a significant role in the development of Bhutan as it reflects the multiple dimensions of Bhutanese society and its culture. Before the advancement of modern technology, folk knowledge and indigenous technology was the long standing traditions and practices of the indigenous communities in the country. People those days basically depended on folk knowledge and indigenous technology for survival.

Folk knowledge and technology in this context is expressed through traditional medicines, traditional measurement, folk meteorology, astrological knowledge, beliefs and superstitions, economy, food and beverages.

### 4.1. TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

Although there were instances of Bhutanese being sent by their patrons to study Traditional Medicine called *Sowa Rigpa* (*Sro ba rig pa*) in Tibet before the arrival of Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal (Zhabdrung Rinpoche), it was only after 1616 that Sowa Rigpa was established in Bhutan. Bhutanese students went to study medicines in Tibet and in return, these doctors provided medicinal herbs as far as Lhasa and further on to Kham. Tibetans had always referred to Bhutan as *Menjong*, or Land of Medicine, because of the natural growth of varieties of medicinal plants at different altitudes ranging from 200 to 7800 meters above sea level.

Most of the trained doctors would return home to start private practices in monasteries or *dzongs*. Thus the Bhutanese tradition of Sowa Rigpa developed independent of its Tibetan roots. Although the basic texts used were the same, some differences have developed in practice by way of adapting to the country's situation. The specific knowledge and experiences gained by the Bhutanese practitioners over the centuries are still kept alive in the country.

The profession of traditional medicine was greatly supported, especially after Zhabdrung Rinpoche, by the *Poenlops* and *Dzongpoens* (regional leaders). The Royal Courts employed at least one or two private *Drungtsho* or physicians. The names of many traditional drungtshos of the past who excelled in their skills have remained alive in the memory of the people long after their death. Finally in the early 1960s, His Majesty the Druk Gyalpo Jigme Dorji Wangchuck established a centre for traditional medicine in Dechencholing to provide indigenous medical services to the people. This has grown into the National Institute for Traditional Medicine in Kawa Jangsa in Thimphu that trains drungtshos, treats patients of all ailments and manufactures the required medicines. For the Bhutanese people, it gives them a choice for treating their ailments.

The Bhutanese indigenous medicine has its origin in the teachings of the Buddha and, as such, has a religious orientation in its practices whereby the drungtsho needs to be a devotee of Medicine Buddha. Health and spirituality are thus inseparable and together they reveal the true origins and healing of any sickness. The art of healing is therefore a dimension of the sacred.

The traditional medical system is a conglomeration of science, philosophy and religion that blend culture and tradition, in which Buddhism has a big influence. It provides a comprehensive way of understanding the universe, man and his sicknesses. Unlike modern medicine, Traditional Medicine does not have surgical miracles but connect our lives and sicknesses to the natural causes of things. The Bhutanese believe that all that matter is the strong belief and faith in the healers.

#### 4.1.1. Medicinal Ingredients

Therapeutically, the traditional drungtshos rely on herbal combinations, limited acupuncture therapy (including use of the golden needle), applications of heat (usually with metal rods), and minor surgical interventions, all done in the context of Buddhist ritualism. The indigenous medicine in Bhutan is largely collected from plants grown around the country, varieties of animal organs and minerals in the compositions of medication. Originally, herbal powders were swallowed with warm water, but with the introduction of modern equipment, the mixture of herbs is now produced as pills. The specific formulas used in Bhutan differ somewhat from their Tibetan counterparts in that there are local influences on the selection of herbs, though most of the key herbs are the same, where the altitude and climatic conditions are similar to that of Tibet. All these ingredients are processed and mixed as prescribed in Sowa Rigpa pharmacology to make drugs in the form of pills, tablets, syrups, powders.