

DAVID CROW (2000): *In Search of the Medicine Buddha. A Himalayan Journey*, Tarcher/Putnam, N.Y.

This work represents a participant-observer study of northern rasayana practices by a young American practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine. His journeys to the north of India brought him into contact with an ancient tradition that challenges to the core biomedical attitudes towards mineral toxicity. David Crow relates his experiences in working with Ayurvedic practitioners who have a special interest in the processing of mercury for medicinal purposes.

David Crow honours the integrity of his respondents. Having been himself trained in a cultural system of medicine which utilises concepts and principles that lie well beyond the parameters of contemporary biomedicine, he approaches his study with openness and without prejudice. His report offers an even-handed entry into Indian medical practices that would make the hair of most biomedical practitioners stand on end.

Crow is clearly a child of his times. His discursive and, at times, naive style is fully consonant with the pragmatism that characterises contemporary North American consciousness. He is certainly no Theos Bernard who left no stone unturned in his own immersion in and transmission of yogic and tantric culture in the early 1950s. But Crow's work provides us with a useful reminder of the continuing influence of a long-standing tradition that informs and energises the indigenous medical practices of India.

Crow offers rare insight into the various procedures that have been used since the time of Nagarjuna to purify highly toxic metals and minerals in the search for medicines that act on physical, psychic and spiritual levels. He provides detailed descriptions of the methods used by his respondents in their operations on mercury and sulphur, the key constituents of the more powerful medicines used by adepts of the Siddha tradition and specialist practitioners of rasayana in Ayurvedic medicine.

His study also reaffirms the view that alchemical medicines – regardless of the tradition from which they are derived - serve primarily to vivify and intensify those energetic and luminous principles that interpenetrate and empower somatic reality.

Crow's report confronts biomedical assumptions head-on. It is therefore not surprising that this work made its way onto the remainder shelves of bookshops within a short twelve months of its initial publication.

According to tradition, Maitreya, the future Buddha, will be in possession of the great elixir sought by alchemists of all ages. This notion, perhaps, underlies the naming of the book.

VDS, Melbourne
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Introduction

One cannot go far into Ayurveda without encountering alchemy; soon after, one comes face to face with mercury. I wished to learn about mercury's powers, and the shimmering silver water from the serpent realms granted my wish. What I found was as strange a paradox as the element itself, which is at once gaseous, metallic, and liquid. It is the semen of God, say the Himalayan alchemists, a universal essence with peculiar properties analogous to the human mind: when impure, it is deadly, but when purified, it becomes the greatest longevity - and enlightenment - bestowing sacrament. We must treat mercury with care and reverence, for its secrets, dangers, and benefits are more sublime, insidious, and subtle than we suspect. "It will increase the power of your thoughts," the King's alchemist cautioned, handing me a small bead of mysteriously solidified hydrargyrum. pp 10-11

1. The Medicine Buddha

According to one of the unique doctrines of Tibetan philosophy, when a Buddha "turns the wheel of Dharma" - that is, gives teachings that elevate others to higher states of existence - he appears in the form of a deity; at the same time the world is transformed into a corresponding sacred realm, the abode of that deity. There are many versions describing the details of when and where the historical Sakyamuni Buddha, as Bhaisajyaguru, gave the teachings on medicine: one says that it occurred in northwest India; others describe it as one of several different heavens. p 23

Bhaisajyaguru is the patron deity of Tibetan medicine, the archetypal mentor of its physicians and students, and a source of healing for the sick. When preparing formulas, doctors recite mantras of the Master of Remedies: prescribing medicines and giving treatments is regarded as making offerings to the deity. Sange Menla is invoked with liturgical chanting and ceremonial music every day in Tibetan medical colleges. The students are taught that medicines are gifts bestowed by the deity, mentors are his living embodiment, and books and teachings are his words. Across Asia and through the long span of centuries, the temples of Vhaisajyaguru have drawn those in search of health. pp 27-28

In the first phase of the practice, the meditator envisions and feels the solid body becoming insubstantial like empty space; this is followed by mentally recreating oneself in the form of the deity, who performs the main part of the sadhana. In the final stages of the sadhana this process is repeated, first dissolving the visualization of the deity into oneself, then resting in the space-like emptiness of open awareness without giving rise to a concept of a self, and finally re-emerging into one's own body. This method of disassociating from ordinary perceptions, entering into emptiness, appearing as a deity, then returning through emptiness to the physical body teaches the grasping mind to liberate itself from habitual clinging to perishable outward appearances. Ultimately, the purpose of this type of meditation is to achieve spiritual freedom: by repeatedly projecting and withdrawing consciousness in and out of gross and subtle forms, the meditator recognizes that "reality" has an illusory, mind-created nature. p 29

2. The Tree of Knowledge

Physicians of old were also botanists who knew the identification of numerous plants, their habitats, and details of their uses. Taking herb and mineral supplies back to their workshops and laboratories, they became chemists, extracting, purifying, and blending the medicinal substances in their final form. As alchemists, they researched and developed elixirs for extending life and enhancing consciousness, performing complex procedures with the metals, minerals, gems, and poisons collected during their travels. Many physicians have been priests, priestesses, shamans, and philosophers who understood the deepest workings of nature unseen by most, and who achieved spiritual realization as a result of their contemplations. Much of their healing work was linked to ceremony and worship. pp 43-44

Gathering herbs and preparing them by hand was once the foundations of medicinal practice. It was a livelihood that involved physical exercise, prayer, and solitude in the beauty and grandeur of the wilderness; these were as healthy for the doctor's body and soul as the herbs were for the patient's. Doctors learned the curative effects of the plants by smelling their aromas and tasting their flavours as they harvested and prepared the ingredients for their formulas, benefiting from their healing powers in the process. These activities shaped the physician's worldview and guided him in his relationship with nature and society. p 47

3. The Brahmin's Instructions

Alchemically prepared mercury is also a component of Tantra; it is consumed as a longevity drug and to enhance psychic concentration, and is used as a ritual sacrament. Conversely, Indian alchemy is strongly influenced by Hindu Tantra. The stages of mercurial preparations are preceded by invocations and prayers to Shiva, the King of the Yogis, accompanied with mantras of the various deities, and guided by astrological calculations. Both paths are based on devotional relationships among God, guru and disciple, and shrouded in secrecy. The goals of both are identical: good health, longevity, wisdom, power, spiritual and material wealth, and enlightenment. p 65

"This medicine [makaradwaj] requires one month to prepare," he [Dr Kamadev Jha] said. "Most of this time is taken up by doing the preliminary purifications of gold and mercury. The actual firing itself takes seventy-two hours. It requires a special kind of heat and cooking apparatus to make the evaporated mercury and gold blend with each other. This is done inside a bottle called a kajkupi.

First, we take one tola [ten grams] of gold and beat it slowly into fine leaf. This is then cut with scissors into small pieces and purified. The way this is done is to take the pieces of gold and heat them in the fire until red hot, then submerge them in a series of different substances. There are different recipes for this, but they usually use sesame oil, cow urine, curd, vinegar, dal and other things. Then we take eight tolas of totally purified mercury and rub it in the mortar with the purified gold. When these are completely blended, we cook the mercury and gold with 120 grams of purified

sulfur. This is done in the usual way of making kajjali [black sulfide of mercury], by rubbing in a hot mortar with a hot pestle. In this recipe we rub this kajjali with the juice of a cotton flower, the root skin of ankot, and the juice of aloes for four hours. This is kept in the sun until dry and then put into the kajkupi."

Dr Jha paused for a moment and referred to one of his other books.

"What is a kajkupi?" I asked.

"The kajkupi is a glass bottle that is wide at the bottom and has a narrow neck at the top. The minerals go inside the kajkupi, which goes into an earthen pot that is completely packed with sand. The pot is sealed with mud and cloth and then fired. Controlling the heat is very important for makaradwaj. This is why the kajkupi is buried in the sand: it heats up very slowly and evenly.

We also have to use a special technique when firing. Cow dung is used, and for the first four hours the fire is mild. Then the fire is increased to medium heat for four more hours, and finally a hard fire is built. This burns for sixty-four hours. After this the fire is allowed to go out and the pot to cool completely. When we open it we find the makaradwaj crystallized around the inside of the neck of the kajkupi. To get it out, the neck is broken carefully." pp 87-88

Makaradwaj is a form of HgS, mercuric sulfide. It is chemically the same as cinnabar, but the two are claimed to have entirely different properties. The alchemical explanation of this phenomenon is that mercury has the property of absorbing the actions of other substances with which it is sublimed. During sublimation the mercury acquires a potent efficacy and is then regarded as a valuable tonic. p 88

The guru continued his discourse, describing how makaradwaj is administered for several obstinate and otherwise incurable diseases. "In Ayurveda we say that life is the mixing together of the soul and the body. Makaradwaj is very good for supporting life. When people are dying, makaradwaj is given in one-grain doses to stimulate the heart. If the heart is failing, one rati is mixed with two ratis of purified coral and two ratis of purified pearl and is given three to four times a day. It is also very good to mix this medicine with musk and take with honey, as a stimulant." p 89

We spent the rest of the evening discussing alchemy and the importance of purification procedures in the making of classical medicines. "The greatest mineral medicines are those that have been transformed into nectar by one thousand cookings in the fire," Dr Jha said. "A physician who prepares his medicines in this way becomes a 'nectar-handed' physician. This kind of healer is one who has incorporated his philosophic understanding into his whole practice." p 90

4. The King's Alchemist

Alchemy, known in Ayurveda as Rasa Shastra, the science of mercury, is a unique blend of medicine and mysticism. Medicinal alchemy is an academically recognized field of study that is taught in every Ayurvedic university in India. This well known

and publicly practiced branch of Rasa Shastra utilizes a variety of purified substances, including mercury, for preventing and curing diseases. The mystical branch of Rasa Shastra is based on this "iatrochemistry" but uses primarily mercury; the goal of this tradition is complete rejuvenation of body and mind, leading to jiva mukti, spiritual liberation within this lifetime. p 94

For some Ayurvedic doctors, who have received instruction in Rasa Shastra as part of their medical training, subjects such as levitation and changing mercury into gold are explained as either a form of science we no longer understand, or a reality that transcends ordinary perceptions. For a classical alchemist - or for someone like Gopal, whose worldview seems to be left over from a seventh-century past life - assertions of alchemy's fantastic possibilities are taken not only as literally true, but as a higher form of truth. p 95

The highest purpose of Indian alchemy is not the transformation of base metals into gold but the achievement of jiva mukti, and emancipation from all suffering. Rasa Shastra philosophy believes that without a healthy and well-functioning body, one cannot perform the yogic practices that bring the mind under control, and without control of the mind, comprehension of ultimate reality is impossible. In order to achieve jiva mukti, it is necessary for the body to be free of diseases, to have a full lifespan, and not to be burdened with the hindrances of physical aging; these conditions provide the basis for stabilization of the mind. Even so, neither a healthy body nor a stable mind alone can bring about jiva mukti: only when sustained together and used for prolonged spiritual practice can they produce enlightenment. pp 97-98

Before the purified mercury can be used for purposes of rejuvenation, the channels of the body must be cleansed of their impurities. This is done using the methods of pancha karma, or the five purification processes, which include oil massage and herbal steam baths, therapeutic vomiting, laxatives, medicated enemas, and nasal insufflations. During these treatments the yogi is given a special diet, and herbs that stimulate digestion and metabolism. After the stages of pancha karma have been completed, more herbs are administered to sequentially remove excess salts, excess acids, excess alkalis, and parasites from the body.

Once the body has been properly prepared for rasayan therapy, the alchemically purified mercury is administered in increasing doses for periods of up to several months. During this time, and throughout the rest of one's life, strict dietary, social, and religious disciplines must be followed to ensure the success of the treatment, and to avoid the serious consequences of disturbing the new metabolic balance and enhanced awareness. Rasa Shastra claims that one who has performed this practice will live a full life span, without the usual signs of deterioration such as graying of hair and wrinkling of skin. If used in conjunction with other practices such as yoga and meditation, an individual who has been strengthened and rejuvenated with this rasayana therapy may then reach the ultimate goal of jiva mukti. It is for this reason that most of the Sanskrit names for mercury are synonymous of Lord Shiva, indicating that the liquid metal is regarded as God's essence. Mercury's most common name is parada, meaning "that which helps achieve salvation." pp 99-100

The first step in every mercurial preparation, whether for ordinary medicines, high-

level rasayanas, transmutation, or jiva mukti, is to produce chemically pure mercury. Because mercury easily forms amalgams with other metals and gathers opportunistic debris from the environment or marketplace, it must be thoroughly cleansed before being subjected to shodhana, alchemical refinement leading to non-toxicity. One of the preferred alchemical methods for accomplishing this is to extract the mercury from its ore, cinnabar.

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When the cinnabar was powdered, we sliced fresh limes and squeezed their juice into the mortar. Raman skillfully pushed the pestle across the shiny mixture in the oval-shaped stone. His hands moved with a natural grace, born of decades of intimacy with the mineral kingdom.

"We rub the cinnabar with lime juice," Raman explained. "Then it has to dry in the sun. This is called bhavana, processing with sunlight. The juice evaporates, and we repeat the process three times. The hingula reacts with the citric acid, which causes the parad to leave quickly. It opens the hingula."

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"There are two kinds of work with parada," Gopal said. "Medicinal work is the ordinary level, making medicines like we are here, purifying mercury to make kajjali or makaradwaj. Mercury like this is very powerful for curing disease, but it does not have any spiritual power. It is only background work. The real work of mercury is called dibir rasayan, which means 'cosmic alchemy.' This is a special kind of labor, and a very great way of giving devotion."

Dibir rasayan, as Gopal referred to it, was the path of the Tantric alchemists, who approached mercury as the ultimate sacrament. Their laboratories were shrines and temples, and their work an immensely spiritual undertaking, for they saw in mercury's mysterious transmutations nothing less than the keys of enlightenment. It was a dangerous path, which has led some to illumination and wisdom, and others to their death. The simple procedure that now unfolded in Dr Aryal's rustic laboratory was merely a preliminary stage in the preparation of Ayurvedic drugs, a common process performed for centuries in every Ayurvedic family pharmacy and company in India and Nepal.

p 111

According to Rasa Shastra, eighteen levels of purification are necessary to produce the superior-grade mercury, which is capable of causing true rejuvenation of the body and transmutation of other metals into gold. These stages are described metaphorically, such as making the metal "sweat" (cleansing it of its impurities); making it "faint" (altering its natural chemical properties); "reviving" (restoring its lost potency); "feeding," "chewing," and "assimilating" (adding other metals to the mercury); and "penetrating" (bringing the metal to a state where it can enter the atomic structure of other metals).

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5. Soma

The luminosity of ojas is closely related to the reproductive fluids, and is depleted by excessive sexual activity and preoccupation. Conserving and increasing this nutrient essence to feed the heart and central nervous system is one of the reasons some

meditators renounce sexual relations and practice celibacy. Preserving ojas is thought to be the best way to promote longevity, strengthen the body, and increase wisdom.
p 128

"And what is the effect of mantra and puja on the preparations of medicines?" I had asked the botanist.

"According to Ayurveda, mantras and pujas make medicines more efficacious," he answered. "You are using your inner energy to potentize the drug. The biochemistry of this is unknown."

"Sanyasins and siddhus just give the ash of their fireplace to patients, and many people claim they have been cured. Maybe those siddhus somehow put their own energy into the ash, and that is how it cured the disease. Some people use mantras for treating illness, generally in psychic conditions. They read some prayers, put some drugs in the fire and fumigate the patients, and after some time they will recover. When we recite mantric verses, the words change into energy, and that may decrease the doshas. When we pronounce sacred syllables, the pitch, tone, and wavelength vary, so maybe these are responsible for changing the enzymes and hormones in the brain, which could give relief. This is the science of sound."
pp 156-157

6. Desire and Emancipation

Siddha Chintamani, the Wish-Fulfilling Jewel, is also the name of White Mahakala, one of the wrathful deities in the Tibetan pantheon of "Dharma protectors." Siddha Chintamani Mahakala danced in a mass of flames upon a fiery sun-disc, red beard and hair flowing upward around his three eyes. With six mighty arms representing the transcendent perfections, he makes gestures of power, scaring away demons with frightful weapons, the sound of his mantra resounding like thunder. A drop of supernaturally pure mercury floats in the center of his heart, while retinues of goddesses remove obstacles and bestow abundance. Pouring priceless gems from a crystal vase, he fills the skies with resplendence and showers the earth with prosperity. His world is a mandala of treasures: the sun is iridescent gold, and the moon polished silver; diamond stars burn in the translucent aquamarine sky; opal clouds float over oceans of liquid turquoise; ruby flowers grow among emerald trees and jade grasses.
176-177

"What is the most important thing you have learned?" I once asked the siddhu Narayan Giri. He was a man who knew the heart of others, so I listened to his words, and have thought about them through the passing years.

"The most important thing to know is who and what we are, where we come from, and where we are going," he had replied, as the sounds of the monsoon-swollen Kali Gandhaki river swirled softly below, and the smell of moist greenery hung in the mists floating through the forest. "What is this body?" Narayan asked, pointing to his brown belly; his smooth skin, warm eyes, and gentle movements revealed how years of yogic solitude in the jungles of India had brought the comfort of royal ease. "It is only the pancha mahabhutas that are dancing ceaselessly. We are born into this form,

but it is always changing, and then we pass away. Everything is impermanent. This world is a dream. Knowing this is Self-Realization." p 189

7. The Forgotten Goddess

Thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara first appeared in this world in India. As the Kashmiri princess-nun Gelongma Palmo lay dying of leprosy in a jungle cave, she beheld the countenance of the deity. Pouring crystal-clear water through her body, he instantaneously cured the disease. Now, he shines like the moon from the windows of thangka shops in Thamel's tangle of narrow carpet-lined alleys, glowing with blessings in the darkness of spiritual poverty.

Avalokiteshvara is male yet filled with feminine qualities. The incomparable alchemy of transmuting the pain of the world into loving-kindness infuses the deity with qualities not unlike those of a goddess, and he has appeared in that form to many. p 230-231

In Rasa Shastra, mercury is considered the sperm of Shiva, and sulfur is the orgasmic vaginal secretions of Parvati. Mercury is never used alone, due to its highly toxic and unstable nature, in order to be valuable for medicines or alchemical purposes, it must be bound to the female molecules of sulfur. Likewise, the sperm of man's body is mercurial in nature, and masculine power without feminine stabilization becomes poisonous to both society and environment. p 232

8. Into the Lotus

One example of reincarnation philosophy applied to medicine appears in the teachings on karmic diseases. Illness can be classified into three levels: superficial, middle, and deep. Superficial conditions are those which are transient and affect the surface of the body, such as colds and flus; these are mostly related to fluctuation in daily routines and weather, and have relatively little mental or emotional significance. Middle-level illnesses are those that accumulate over a longer period of time and affect deeper organ systems; these are caused by lifestyle, such as liver diseases from alcoholism, and have a greater degree of emotional involvement. The deepest levels of illness are karmic diseases, spiritual and mental negativities that are carried in the stream of consciousness from lifetime to lifetime. They are brought from the last life into the current one, and become integrated into the embryo at the time of conception. These diseases are therefore intimately linked with the health and karma of the parents, in the sense that they provide the circumstances for the karma to ripen. pp 243-244

In order to cure karmic diseases, the body must be treated, but more important, the causative negative karma must be removed from the mind. This is accomplished through the purification of consciousness by spiritual practices. In some cases the combination of physical and spiritual healing can cure the disease. In other cases the disease is incurable, because the illness is too powerful and the body too weak to recover. If the disease is in an incurable stage, then spiritual purification of the mind

is said to help remove the karmic cause by the root, so that its seeds are not carried into the next lifetime to sprout again. pp 244-245

9. Sattvic Medicine

Based on the gunas, Ayurveda describes three realms of medicine. "There are tamasic, rajasic, and sattvic treatments," Gopal commented one afternoon, as we sat with Dr Aryal in his laboratory. "Tamasic treatments come from the demonic realms; they are harsh methods that cause pain, fear, and bad effects, like surgery and toxic drugs. Rajasic treatments come from the middle realm of humans and the earth; they consist of bitter, salty, sour, and astringent tastes, which aren't pleasant but have good effects. The sattvic treatment is rasayana, alchemical rejuvenation. This is brought from heaven, and has no bad tastes or negative effects. It is not just here: it is very popular in other galaxies, with the gods in heaven, the rishis, and divine beings."

Dr Aryal concurred, adding that "medicines from the highest realm are alchemical elixirs, created by the union of pure spiritual practice and the outer transmutation of medicinal substances. The physician who creates these nectar medicines is renowned throughout the three worlds." pp 260-261

One of the first diagnostic concepts taught in Chinese medicine is that of *shen*, spiritual presence. Its written character depicts a field of earth intersected by a vertical brush stroke; this ideogram conveys the concept of immaterial breath becoming infused within matter. Shen is described as that which gives cohesion to consciousness; in Ayurvedic terminology it is the luminosity of ojas and vibrant positive prana emanating from the heart and brain. Shen gives clarity to the eyes and confidence to the voice. When the spirit is bright, the patient is willing to listen to the messages from the body, accept responsibility for creating health by making lifestyle changes, and learn from the experience of illness. These sattvic manifestations of bright shen activate the immune system and hasten healing; with a shining spirit, even serious diseases can be overcome. When the shen is dull, the patient is said to have a "wooden" complexion and pessimistic attitude; with a weakened spirit, even a simple illness becomes difficult to treat. p 266

Herbs that are capable only of curing diseases are considered inferior to those with powers to both cure and prevent illness, while those which not only cure and prevent illness, but also facilitate spiritual evolution, are regarded as supreme medicines. The "divine drugs" such as Soma, and purified mercury used for rasayana in Tantric alchemy, are considered the highest level of medicinal substances from this earth, capable of healing every disease and bestowing jiva mukti. p 271

10. The Sperm of Shiva

Throughout my studies of Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine, I encountered no subject more mysterious, complex, or controversial than mercury. The metal and its gases are a virulent poison, yet Vaidyas have claimed for millennia that when properly cleansed and sublimated, it becomes supreme among all medicines. Mercurial drugs have a

long history of use in Asia, with over a thousand years of clinical experience, but virtually no modern research into their actions has been undertaken. p 299

Mercury was introduced into Ayurvedic medicine in the second century by Nagarjuna. Prior to this, many centuries of experimentation by alchemists yielded important discoveries about the metal's chemical properties. Seeking compassionate and painless alternatives to the surgical practices of the time, Dharma kings of the Indian Buddhist period promoted research into the use of mercury as a medicine. The result was Rasa Shastra, a medical system powerful and effective enough to replace surgery, yet conform to the Buddhist doctrine of ahimsa, nonviolence. By the 1200s, medicinal alchemy had spread into Tibet, where it was used to create the "jewel pills" of the Amchis. p 303

According to Dr Bhagwan Dash, one of the foremost scholars of Ayurveda, "It has been clinically observed that mercuric sulfide compounds, even if used for a considerably long time, do not produce any toxic effects." Ayurvedic physicians acknowledge, however, that if not prepared according to traditional methods, or if improperly prescribed, mercurial medicines can be extremely dangerous. p 305

According to Ayurvedic philosophy, parada's fire strongly increases the digestive transformation of the body, mind, and senses, helping to eliminate accumulated toxins, providing nutrition to the cells, and generating energy. Rasadis also provide an immense amount of prana, the current of vital force, which in turn is the basis for rejuvenation of ojas. If used correctly, mercury can increase prana, tejas, and ojas, which then restore the equilibrium of the three doshas, thus producing harmonious functioning of the body's elements. Ultimately, if used for rasayana purposes to bring about jiva mukti, parad can induce the flow of Soma, the sweet nectar of spiritual consciousness. If used incorrectly, however, mercury's intense energy, like the uncontrolled awakening of kundalini's bioelectric current, can wreak havoc in the body. pp 308-309

Rasa Shastra utilizes many methods for purifying mercury; these are classified into either eight stages, for standard level rasadis, or eighteen, for superior medicines. Many of the preliminary sequences involve removing the opportunistic impurities of other metals, like lead, tin, and zinc. These are cleansed from the mercury by repeatedly mixing it with various substances such as wool, brick dust, charcoal, tumeric, lemon, and datura seeds, for prolonged periods of time, distilling the metal after exposure to each substance. After the metallic poisons are removed, further procedures cleanse the mercury's remaining impurities. Finally, the mercury is mixed with the juice of ginger, garlic, and lemon, three times each, and distilled after each rubbing in the mortar. This makes the mercury ready for standard-level medicines. If a doctor wishes to make medicines of a higher quality and potency, more procedures follow. p 310

When I inquired about the potential for mercurial drugs to cause toxicity in the kidneys and liver, the doctor [Dr Thakur] responded by describing some of his experiences with rasadis in the treatment of serious conditions of those organs. "Modern medicine has no treatment for cirrhosis of the liver, and considers it incurable," he said. "I have had many cirrhosis patients, and am currently treating five

cases. I have given them mercuric medicines for over a year and a half. They are almost completely recovered; their general symptoms are gone, and liver function tests are within normal limits. I have never seen any nephrological problems or other pathological changes in the reports, so I am confident from my own experience that mercuric preparations do not harm the body. If rasadis are harmful, they would have harmed those who have been taking them for more than a year." p 312

Even though their use is discouraged by some practitioners, mercurial medicines continue to be an integral part of health maintenance and medical treatment throughout the Indian subcontinent. Each of the 150 Ayurvedic colleges in India teaches rasadis as a major part of its curriculum, with each school graduating between fifty and a hundred doctors every year. Between the combined prescriptions of these physicians and the large number of major reputable companies providing rasadis to the public over the counter, the quantities of mercurial drugs consumed per year must be huge. These compounds have been the most renowned medicines in this part of the world since at least the days of Nagarjuna, if not a thousand years earlier, as some claim, making the number of people who have used them through the centuries uncountable. Rasadis have been consumed for so many generations, and so many people have seen their parents and grandparents routinely using them, that there is widespread skepticism regarding modern doctors' claims of toxicity. pp 314-315

One day Gopal brought a saddhu to my house, explaining that the bearded baba had spent many years working in Ayurvedic pharmacies and was adept at the preparation of minerals for medicinal use. Following the guru's instructions, Gopal and I melted several kilos of fresh butter in an iron vat, skimmed off the froth until only the clear ghee remained, then poured in yellow sulfur crystals.

The crystals sank to the bottom of the vat and melted, becoming a deep-purple liquid. The undulating mass began releasing golden metallic globules, which rose slowly to the surface. Our teacher explained that there were the poisonous impurities of the mineral that had to be skimmed off.

After the sulfur had been cleansed by boiling in ghee, we poured it through a cloth. The bright oily mineral sizzled and spat as the brown sludge seeped away. We put the resulting sulfur cake in a pot of milk and brought it to a low boil. When finished, the milk was poured off and the cake washed with water. The entire process was then repeated two more times. p 321

11. Beautiful to Behold

Over a period of thirty years, the Kathmandu Valley has gone from a pastoral kingdom reminiscent of Sudarshan, to a place of asphyxiating pollution, miserable overcrowding, and cultural decay. Kathmandu's degradation is a reflection of afflicted cities everywhere, and the decimation of the country's forests, jungles, and farmlands is typical of the disappearance of natural resources around the world. Physicians in Kathmandu are facing rising tides of illness brought by undrinkable water, unbreathable air, and unlivable social conditions, from which they, too, suffer. Medicine is becoming palliative at best, and disease-producing at worst. If these

trends continue to worsen, all medical systems, both modern and traditional, will ultimately be rendered futile, and health care meaningless. p 330

Even under the best medical conditions, synthetic pharmaceuticals have an inherent flaw which renders them incapable of curing the diseases of the future: they can neither cleanse toxins from the body nor regenerate vitality. Ultimately, all sickness is related to these two physiological processes which are now under increasing stress from environmental pollution and degradation of the food chain. Without agents to remove the rising accumulation of chemical, metallic, and radioactive poisons in our bodies, especially the liver, and without compounds to enhance and strengthen resistance and immunity, allopathic medicines will become increasingly ineffective and inappropriate. p 331

The atmosphere in Kathmandu is apocalyptic, heavy with the scent of pestilence waiting to emerge from the bleak poverty of these rat-infested alleys. Pneumonic plague has erupted in India, and fear has spread its tentacles into Nepal. What will happen when waves of global epidemics begin to rise from cities drowning in their own waste? The local clinics are already understaffed, poorly supplied, and overwhelmed with the sick and dying. There is not even enough firewood to burn the dead on the ghats. This once-beautiful Himalayan kingdom has become a terrible version of the world's future. p 337

In the face of rising global pollution levels, doctors will be called upon to make a transition from synthetic substances which compound the toxic burden on the body, to plant-based formulations which reduce it. p 347

The healing of humanity's ancient wounds and the rebirth of Dharmic culture rests upon ecological renewal. Environmental restoration is a unifying purpose that brings together families of diverse racial, ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds in a common struggle against the threat of biospheric collapse. By following the Medicine Buddha's wordless commandment to plant trees, cleanse the skies and seas, and harvest the fruits of sattvic planetary care-taking, the divisive conflicts carried through the ages can be forgotten. p 356