



Medicine from afar close to home

By Karolyn Maurer

SPRING GREEN — Dr. Yangbum Gyal can detect a heart condition by looking at a tongue — and liver problems by staring into a pair of eyes.

Gyal practices Tibetan medicine, which believes internal health issues are apparent through external features. He said ears are the flower of the kidneys, lips are the window for the spleen and lung problems can be revealed through the nose.

Gyal is one of 10 Tibetan doctors in the U.S. and the only physician practicing Tibetan medicine in Wisconsin, his assistant Julia Lambert said. He sees patients at the Medicine Buddha Healing Center in Spring Green on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. The location was personally selected in 1999 by the late Dr. Tenzin Choedrak, physician for the Dalai Lama.

"Tibetan medicine is a holistic approach to health care," Gyal said, and therefore concentrates on doctor-to-patient interaction, never using medical machines. He does charge a fee, which insurance does not cover.

Gyal taught Tibetan medicine, language and culture at Indiana University-Bloomington after escaping Tibet in 1998 due to lack of freedom. He said he may return to Tibet when it's free from China's rule.

When a patient has a health problem, Gyal first advises them to make diet and lifestyle changes, like increasing activity level or reducing alcohol consumption. "We are what we eat, we are what we do, we are what we think," he said.

Tibetan medicine also includes yoga, meditation and massage therapy. If the problem continues, Gyal seeks natural medication made of herbs and plants — some grown in Indonesia, others from the 160 acres of land surrounding the healing center.

"Natural medicine not only treats the symptoms but also the root," Gyal said. "Tibetan medicine is for the root (health) problem."

Marion Nelson said Tibetan medicine is about the mind, body and spirit working together.

Born with a hereditary neurological illness, doctors told Nelson she would be confined to a wheelchair by age 30 or 40, she said. She made her first trip to India in 1974 and started taking Tibetan medicine in 1978. Now, at age 70, Nelson climbs the old, wooden steps of her four-story business and travels around Asia every year, buying clothing, carvings and furniture to sell in her shop, Global View, which sits next to the healing center.

"I'm not saying it (Tibetan medicine) cures," Nelson said, but it alleviates the symptoms. "I feel Tibetan medicine is best for long term-type illnesses," such as diabetes or arthritis, she said. Gyal said Tibetan medicine can compliment western medicine, and Tibetan practices are often used before and after surgeries.

Gyal lives in Madison and hopes to teach at the University of Wisconsin. He is the author of "Tibetan Medical Dietary Book: Vol. I, the Potency and Preparation of Vegetables," which explains how herbs and plants are used to treat illnesses.