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## Review of *The Knowledge of Healing* by Franz Reichle

Tammy Watkins  
*University of Georgia*

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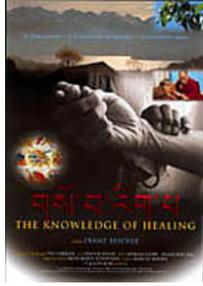
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## Reviews

### The Knowledge of Healing



Directed by Franz Reichle  
Length: 89 mins  
Format: VHS  
Year: 1996

“The Knowledge of Healing” is the name of ancient documents passed down to Tibetan medical practitioners

and it is also the name of a film documenting this practice and its influences around the globe. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century botanical knowledge along with knowledge and theories regarding anatomy, physiology and illness were collected and transcribed into documents that serve as a reference for Tibetan medical practitioners in the film. It is remarkable that eighteen of the illnesses covered in the documents are diseases of the future and due to ‘the environments of the future’.

The film centers around two practitioners who demonstrate the complexity of Tibetan medicine, from diagnosis through various treatments. From the beginning a westerner can detect elements of western medicine even in the most traditional practices such as aseptic cleansing of a cupping site. It is also obvious that Tibetan medicine is thoroughly immersed in a belief system. It is wonderful that the Dalai Lama himself states that while the recitation of mantras during the administration of treatment and prayers and meditation while receiving treatment will probably be helpful if you are Buddhist, it is not necessary for the success of the treatments among non-Buddhists.

The film does focus on two practitioners but also follows the influence of Tibetan medicine along immigrant and refugee routes and even into Europe where knowledge has been appropriated by western scientists and practitioners. The complexity of most of the herbal, plant-based medicines prescribed by Tibetan medical practitioners is one of the key ideas that the film presents. This complexity has also been hypothesized by some anthropologists as an important aspect of plant-based medicines. One remedy contains anywhere from 18 to 25

constituents in one recipe. This same medicine has been tested by biophysicists in the German pharmaceutical industry and by physicians in Israel. Most pharmaceutical testing of plant-based remedies focuses on individual active ingredients and has difficulty considering the potentiating and synergistic effects of more complex concoctions. Some of the researchers in this film attempt to explain how they address this common pitfall.

Although the sympathy, tenderness and sensitivity of many of the examinations is very telling, and possibly contributes to the success of Tibetan medicine in chronic illnesses, I was most impressed by the scenes of a practitioner and his assistant collecting and processing their own medicines. This was later juxtaposed with mass processing and packaging of similar medications to be distributed in the absence of the traditional practices. Although the active ingredients remain the same, it is not difficult to imagine that some of the potency would be lost in the translation.

The closing scene of the film is especially evocative. If only the knowledge of healing could be treasured and guarded in the same manner that these Tibetan practitioners treasure and guard their manuscripts, perhaps all humanity would benefit from more healing.

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Reviewed by Tammy Y. Watkins, Department of Anthropology at the University of Georgia.