

## TRIPHALĀ AND ITS ARABIC AND CHINESE SYNONYMS

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*Triphalā* is a household remedy in India working as a mild laxative. It is usually taken as a powder and is constituted of three dried fruits, of *Phyllanthus emblica* (Amla), *Terminalia Chebula* (Har) and *T. bellerica* (Bahera). As a household remedy it can claim a long past. Its ingredients are indigenous to the Panjab and their formulation must have occurred while the Aryans had long been domiciled there. Caraka<sup>1</sup> was court physician of King Kaniska who ruled from Peshawar about 100 A. D. As physician royal Caraka gives a relatively sophisticated recipe of the medicine claiming it to be a vitalizer. The main ingredients, however, are the above three drugs to be decocted with a couple of others. The first two myrobalans are independently extolled by Caraka. Rāy<sup>2</sup> informs that Bower's Ms., a classic on Indian Medicine, is to be dated C.450 A. D. In Kashiker's<sup>3</sup> translation, of Jolly's Indian Medicine, it is stated that, "the Bower Ms. already knows the three myrobalans, *Triphalā*, as a powder which gives hundred years' life". Thus it must have been a household remedy even in 450 A. D. According to Charaka and to Bower's Ms. longevity becomes the property of the three myrobalans.

When the drugs are individually considered the most important appears to be *Terminalia Chebula*. There are two sources speaking in its favour. Alberuni<sup>4</sup> in his *Materia Medica*, writes that : "When Mamun All Rashid was in Khurasan, after the conquest of Kabul, the king of that country submitted himself to the suzerainty of the Caliph. When the governor of the Caliph went there, the king gave myrobalans to be presented to the Caliph". From such a statement one can legitimately infer that *T. Chebula* was recognized as a life-prolonging drug and therefore worthy of royal present from a potentate to another still higher. Olschak<sup>5</sup> has published an illustrated article reproducing a "Tibetan Meditation roll", showing, "the Blue Buddha of Medicine". There "in Buddha's bowl can be seen the myrobalan fruit which, on account of its reputed health-giving powers, was a symbol of healing. The juice of the fruit was known as the godly drink of long life". Around

VOL. 13, No. 1

the main figure of Buddha there are similar others perhaps as disciples, but each with the "bowl, for the fruit purported to bring long life contains apricots". Obviously apricots are also drugs of longevity, but next in importance to myrobalans. As though to confirm this the central figure of Buddha carries myrobalan fruit in his bowl, and further depicted as "his right hand holding a sprig from the myrobalan tree". The main portion of the scroll is reproduced here as Fig. 1. The leaves are lanceolate and large, seen in



FIG. 1. Buddha of medicine holding a bowl with the fruit of *Terminal chebula*, Har, as the drug of immortality. In his right hand a twig of the same tree, see fig. 2. From a Tibetan roll, Ref. 4.

Fig. 2, characterizing *T. Chebula*, quite unlike those of *Phyllanthus emblica*. Thus the account given in Alberuni and the illustration of *T. chebula*, in the Tibetan roll, harmonize with each other.

Next in importance comes *Phyllanthus emblica*, *āmalaki* in Sanskrit<sup>6</sup>, and Amla in Hindustani. According to Alberuni<sup>7</sup>, it is Amlak in Sysiac and Amlaj in Arabic: the final sound "K" can mutate into that of "J". Hooper and Field<sup>8</sup> give its Persian form as Amlah, obviously a later transliteration of the Hindusthani word, Amla.



FIG. 2. A pen and ink of the twig of *T. chebula* Har, a detail from fig. 1.

Now in about 1932 ascorbic acid was discovered as Vit. C. Soon afterwards it was established that *P. emblica* is perhaps the richest natural source of Vit. C. On this account it must have been empirically found to possess health promoting properties. Caraka assigns it an even superior position than that of *T. chebula*. Now Murray<sup>9</sup> wrote, as early as 1881, that the fruit of *P. emblica* has "anti ascorbic virtues assigned to it by Dr. Mc Nab, in Calcutta Medical Journal of 1837, though Dr. Irvine opines that it does not possess any peculiar virtues". Probably Dr. Mc Nab had a case of

scurvey and some Calcutta Vaidya suggested *P. emblica* being tried by preference. Any one interested in the history of Vitamins should not miss this early and positive record in favour of Vit. C by Murray citing the original publication as source of his information. Now *P. emblica* is rich in two active principles. One is Vit. C., which is a strong reducing agent, and would be a general detoxicating principle. Next would be gallates,



FIG. 3. One of the several disciples of the "Buddha of medicine," aspiring for immortality and holding a bowl with apricot as the drug of immortality  
—From a Tibetan roll, Ref. 4.

which are antioxidants. This feature has recently been established. Bhatt<sup>10</sup> and colleagues inform that, "the fruit juice, as also the (insoluble) sediment, (rich) in gallates" reveal a "remarkably high antioxidant capacity". In this connection the findings of Herman<sup>11</sup> show that "antioxidants increase the life span of mice by 44 p. c. and these results, converted to human terms, mean that the life span would increase from 70 to 100 years". Then *T. chebula* would certainly be the richest in antioxidants and would explain its having been recognized as superior to *P. emblica*. Next to *T.*

*chebula* would be *T. bellerica* as far as antioxidants are concerned but would be duplicating it. The use of *triphala*, as a popular remedy, speaks more in its favour as normalizing health than as conferring longevity. As a popular, and thus well tried remedy, it can easily be accepted by a foreigner even though it may be new to him. This explains *triphala* being Arabicized as *atrifal*, while it was translated into Chinese by the traveller I-Tsing who was in India between 671-695 A. D. He writes, as quoted by Sharma<sup>12</sup>, that "a pill, called *san-teng*, cures several ailments and is not difficult to obtain", which is expected of popular medicine. Giles<sup>13</sup> gives, as character 9552, the word *san-three*. This would be the translation of the suffix, tri, in *triphala*. Character 10868 is *teng*=a plant, not yet identified. Giles gives a term combined with *teng*, for "a shrub the leaves of which are used as tea". A similar decoction of *triphala* would also be one form of using the medicine and has been actually recommended by Caraka. Now *tri-phala*, literally translated as "three-fruits", would be a very mysterious rendering in a foreign language for here a drug and no fruits are implied. Thus arose the preferable translation as *san-teng*=three herbal drugs, to be used as medicinal tea, and also solid, as a large pill. *Terminalia chebula* in Sanskrit is *haritaki*. Nobel-Marburg<sup>14</sup> gives the Chinese equivalent of it as *ho-li-lo*, remarking that it is valued as "the King among the herbs". This remark harmonizes with what Alberuni has reported and with what the Tibetan roll illustrates. Smith<sup>15</sup> also mentions *T. chebula* as *ho-li-leh*. Smith does not record *T. bellerica*. Moreover Blatter<sup>16</sup> and others give the Chinese equivalent of *T. chebula* but they are also silent as to the Chinese equivalent of *T. bellerica*. Apparently its importance was not recognized and with *P. emblica* and *T. chebula* the full benefits of *triphala* was assumed to be complete.

In Arabic, *triphala*=*atrifal*. *T. chebula*=*halilah*, as given in Hooper and Field<sup>17</sup>. This is no doubt a borrowing direct from the Chinese, when *ho-li-leh* (Chinese)=*ha-li-lah* (Arabic). *T. bellerica* is pronounced *bahera*. *Balilah* has obviously been adapted to rhyme with its associated drug, *halilah*. To properly visualize the Arabic transliteration we have to conceive of an intermediate term as the model to be imitated, clarified by the series : *Ba-he-ra*=(*ha-li-lah*)=*ba-li-lah*. Hence *bahera*=*ba-li-lah*. In the Tibetan roll the main figure as medicinal Buddha is in possession of *T-chebula*, as the drug of longevity, but his associates, or disciples, are carrying apricots, fig. 3 here. Whereas, myrobalan is rich in anti-oxidants what could be the justification in favour of apricots. Whipple who received Nobel prize for his work on liver extract in pernicious anemia, found that as regenerating blood, 300 g. of liver can be equalled by 222 g. of dried apricot. Thus apricot would also be a health-promoting agency. The above information summarized in Whipple's Nobel lecture is taken from Kracke<sup>18</sup>.

## SUMMARY

*Triphalā*, a household Indian remedy, comprises of *Terminalia chebula*, *Phyllanthus emblica*, and *Terminalia bellerica*, in order of their importance. *Triphalā* literally, three-fruits, was translated into Chinese as *san-teng*, signifying three-herbal drugs. *T. chebula*, in Sanskrit *haritaki*, was transliterated into Chinese as *ho-li-leh*, and this was Arabicized as *ha-li-lah*. With this, as model, *T. bellerica*, *ba-he-ra*, in Hindusthani, was Arabicized as *ba-li-la*, and not as *ba-he-la*. *Triphalā* was also directly Arabicized as *atrifal*. *P. emblica* is *āmalaki* in Sanskrit. It became *amlak*, in Syriac and *amlaj* in Arabic. In Hindustani it is called *amla*, which gave the Persian form *amlah*. *T. chebula* is rich in anti-oxidants and *P. emblica* in ascorbic acid. Empirically found useful they became popular drugs. In Tibet *T. chebula* has become drug of longevity, as also apricot. The latter has blood regenerating properties to speak in its favour.

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