Every physical substance on earth is a medicine. This core Tibetan medical principle promises enormous potential as much as it raises profound questions: To what extent is food medicine? What about poisons – do Tibetan doctors use these in their medicines? How do they come up with a placebo when testing Tibetan drugs today? As in Hindu and Buddhist cosmology, Tibetan medicine holds that the entire universe is made up of five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. Within the body Tibetan doctors (amchi) recognise three nyepas – the ‘forces’ of wind, bile and phlegm – that are specific combinations of the five elements.

Theresa Hofer