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On Hallowed Ground

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Healing Touch

Wild Earth

■ Text by Shivendra Thapa, Photographs by Thomas Kelly



Walking through the maroon colored gate, past the narrow path, strewn over head with green foliage, there is a subtle sense of earthy ambience about Wild Earth's entrance. It's a small herbal paradise where Carroll Dunham, an anthropologist and proprietor of Wild Earth greets me.

"Wild Earth is a small producer of fine handcrafted Himalayan herbal products: herbal soaps, pillows, essential and massage oils, smudge sticks, amulets and sachets. We design our simple aromatic herbal gift products to enhance well-being. We love to tell rich stories about our products and currently our offerings include products for spas, yogis and travelers." (www.wildearthnepal.com)

Wild Earth's founder, Carroll Dunham, is an anthropologist who has lived in Nepal since 1984. She spent a number of years living in the Humla region of Nepal and Wild Earth began as a way to generate income for Humla women in 1995 and has continued ever since. She has extensively studied the use of Himalayan plants, their patterns and usage and their products are made accordingly. "Fresh and pungent, the herbs we use are carried down from the Himalayas by knowledgeable caretakers of the world's most prolific herb garden." (Wild Earth) As these herbs come from remote areas, there can't be a distinction between the people there and the herbs that grow in their communities. They both entail immense value to and for each other. Carroll understood this through her work in these rural Himalayan communities and wanted to help them economically as well as to sustain the growth of these herbs. Wild Earth's work also extends to other areas besides the production of herbal remedies and oils.

One such unique option they have chosen is *Jampeche*, which is a Tibetan word meaning "gentle external treatments." "Found in the Ghui Zhi, the Tibetan medical canon, *Jampeche* includes methods of kunye- Tibetan massage, herbal poultices (a soft moist mass of adhesive substance, usually heated,

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spread on cloth, and applied to warm, moisten, or stimulate an aching or inflamed part of the body), mud and salt applications, hot stones and hydrotherapy methods." The Himalayas are a picturesque garden of ancient herbal traditions and diverse healing plants. The Ayurvedic tradition of healing traveled from the southern plains up the rivers into the Himalayas. Sowa Rigpa, Tibetan medicine, traveled from the plateau, across trade routes and into the Himalayas. These traditions fused and thrived in the ecological diversity of this mountainous region and have done so for centuries.

Carroll wanted to bring this rich herbal healing tradition and disseminate its wisdom to the outside world. Hence, Wild Earth took the initiative to offer *Jampeche* Himalayan treatment through master masseuse, Joanna Claire. An acupuncture doctor and practicing (Tibetan) Buddhist, 73-year-old American Joanna has refined, developed and mastered therapeutic work of touch to a level few have ever achieved. Carroll emphasizes her expertise, "...While most practitioners of Asian massage work with 8 to 30 vital points on the body, Joanna, like a maestro musician has mastered 600 points." Having practiced for over 30 years on thousands of people, her hands have developed a subtle aware-



ness, enabling her to read and scan a body for pain and discomfort. She then goes on to alleviate the blockages she discovers by applying this traditional knowledge of therapeutic healing. Carroll adds, "For her, the body is a musical instrument, sensitizing it with knowledgeable touch like a virtuoso violinist, awakening vital points and reviving the body's innate rivers."

In contemporary society, massage is widely misunderstood and is seen more as an indulgence than a way to heal. It's partly due to its quick fix perception

and luxury commercialization associated with brothels, which is why it has led people to believe that it's a form of wanton indulgence for those who can afford it. Such perceptions are not entirely false but it belies the true nature of massage and its therapeutic healing attributes. Thus, the respect it actually deserves is fleeting and must be revived by the revelation of its true nature and its immense potential for holistic healing. Unfortunately, most people fail to see therapeutic massage as preventative health therapy. It is due to an inability

to recognize the difference between literate and illiterate hands despite the fact that the number one reason people go to a Spa is for massage. Why touch? "It is one of our most basic needs as a human and we need touch as much as we need water or air." (University of Miami's touch research center) Touch lowers cortisol (an adrenal-cortex hormone that is active in carbohydrate and protein metabolism) levels in the blood, preventing corrosive actions of stress on the body. But just as there is a profound difference between basic meals

and fine cuisine, therapeutic massage is a fine art.

Joanna has chosen *amchis* (traditional Tibetan doctors) for her class in *Jampeche* treatments at Wild Earth. Most *amchis* come from Mustang. The idea is to prepare them as "preventative health specialists", working in spas who will diagnose through the pulse and observation, asking questions and will advise on lifestyle behavior change— from diet and exercise to recommended forms of meditation and *Jampeche* therapies for achieving greater well-being, thus restoring deep rooted internal balance. There is a great demand for such health specialists in the US, EU as well as in Asian countries. This in turn, is reciprocated by the need for *amchis* in the high Himalayas to economically sustain themselves and their families. This kind of specialization in traditional healing methods gives them a dignified and respectable stature overseas rather than being unskilled laborers abroad. This entire training of *amchis* is designed in such a way that "its *amchis* supporting *amchis*," as Carroll aptly puts it. After completing the training with Joanna, some *amchis* choose to go and use their skills overseas while others opt to help their local communities. Those who will go as preventative health advisors to five star spas, thus diagnosing and offering suggestions, their monthly salary will be matched with an extra \$150 that will go directly to a local *amchis* salary, working in a rural clinic in the Himalayas. This way *amchis* can support other *amchis* and ensure the continuity of this tradition in the rural mountain communities where it has been fostered and has flourished for centuries.

Wild Earth's first class of young Himalayan *amchis* has just finished their 5-year course of study. Others have completed 7 years. They are eager to learn *Jampeche* as a tool for preventative health and as an aid for long term chronic conditions. They have just completed one month (168 hours) of training in YabYum Massage, Shab Nyi (*Jampeche* Foot Massage) U Shel Gi Kunye (*Jampeche* Head and Face Massage) and Introductory Training in Do Ye Tsa Duk (Himalayan Healing Hot Stone Massage). They are now completing the required one month practice training which includes 15 minutes a day of Spa Sessions—a training module developed by Naomi Campbell, and diagnosis and consult-

JOANNA CLAIRE

Why Massage?

JC: It is an extension of energy that moves through me and is returned. The element of touch with hands is not for everyone all the time. But many can experience and feel the benefit of touch: it helps the immune system, the nervous system, the muscular and skeletal system and can aid digestion as well as emotional release.

Why this training?

JC: These *amchis* are already serious about healing as a profession and there is an understanding of the Buddhist texts—the motivation to heal and help. It cannot be overstated that motivation and intent are as critical if not more critical than skill. One's hands are only as good as one's heart. It is most rewarding to work with *amchis*. But saying that, I never met a student I didn't love. In all the countries I have taught, I have found beautiful hearts and good hands for this work.

How would you describe what you do?

JC: The way a Tibetan doctor reads illness in the pulse, I read the entire body. There is diagnosis in touch if one is sensitive. But you must let it come to you. You must learn to listen to the body. If one is trained, one knows what to recognize and how to respond. People have no problem investing in grandiose spa architecture, but few really seem willing to invest in training yet. They all want short, quick trainings but learning to master touch awareness and literacy, training hands to see and read the body is an art that takes time. I hope that in my lifetime, ancient modalities will be recognized for the depths contained within them to enhance well-being and that massage will not be seen as an indulgence but a powerful tool for preventative health. I think the Spas of the future will recognize this, just as easily as the clients do.

ing training to refine their ability to express in English what they read in pulse diagnosis and how to convey their knowledge of Tibetan prescriptions for preventative health. This way, they also become ambassadors of their tradition.

"When we touch this domain, we are filled with the cosmic force of life itself, we sink our roots deep into the

black soil and draw power and being, up into ourselves. We know the energy of the numen and are saturated with power and being. We feel grounded, centered, in touch with the ancient and eternal rhythms of life. Power and passion well up like an artesian spring and creativity dances in celebration of life."

(David N. Elkjns, *The Sacred as the source of Personal Passion and Power*) ■

