

## ISA REGIONAL GUEST LECTURE

**“POTENCY-IN-BECOMING”: ARTISANSHIP  
AMONG AMCHI PRACTITIONERS MAKING  
SOWA RIGPA MEDICINES IN LADAKH****JAN VAN DER VALK AND BARBARA GERKE**DEPARTMENT OF SOUTH ASIAN, TIBETAN AND BUDDHIST STUDIES (ISTB),  
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This lecture is based on ethnographic fieldwork with Sowa Rigpa practitioners (*amchi*) in Ladakh in the summer of 2018. The key research questions for our fieldwork have been: How is potency (*nuspa*) understood and altered during the process of turning potent substances into multicomponent medicines? How do *amchi* understand *nuspa* and actively engage with it during skilled workmanship, making their medicines - often still by hand - using grinding stones, cooking, trituration and burning techniques. We approach *amchi* as artisans, drawing on Ingoldian perspectives of enskilment, materiality and becoming. Tim Ingold proposes to be more attentive to the properties of materials as the true source of their agency or ‘power.’ We are also inspired by the work of historian Pamela Smith, who approaches artisanship as forms of embodied knowledge, which in her case studies of European craftsmanship frequently emerged more from practical experience than textual transmissions. Together, we explore how these two approaches might meaningfully inform Sowa Rigpa practical medicine making in our ethnographic settings in Ladakh, aiming to understand the dynamic meshwork of raw materials being transformed into potent medicines within the contexts of their longstanding oral and textual traditions.



JAN VAN DER VALK is a scholar-practitioner with a multi-disciplinary training in the fields of biology, ethnobotany and anthropology. Jan’s main interest revolves around the techno-scientific and material processes that transform natural substances into Tibetan medical formulas. Since 2012, Jan has been studying Sowa Rigpa with Dr. Pasang Yonten Arya and in 2017, he opened the Blue Poppy Dispensary in Belgium. Since June 2018 he has worked as a postdoctoral researcher in the FWF-funded project “Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals.” He has co-authored a quality control study of Chinese herbs on the UK market (*Journal of Herbal Medicine*), and is co-editor with Barbara Gerke of the forthcoming special issue on “Materiality, Efficacy, and the Politics of Potent Substances across Asia” in the journal *Himalaya*.

BARBARA GERKE is an anthropologist primarily focused on Sowa Rigpa. She recently completed an FWF-funded Lise-Meitner fellowship at the University of Vienna (2015-2018), researching biographies of Tibetan precious pills. Since June 2018, she has been the principle investigator of the FWF-funded project “Potent Substances in Sowa Rigpa and Buddhist Rituals.” Her major publications include *Long Lives and Untimely Deaths: Life-span Concepts and Longevity Practices among Tibetans in the Darjeeling Hills, India* (Brill, 2012) and *Taming the Poisonous: Mercury, Toxicity, and Safety in Tibetan Medical Practice* (Heidelberg University Publishing, forthcoming in 2019).

