

Eliot Tokar

*Tibetan Medicine: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Health and Healing*  
Week Two: “Resolving Circulatory Imbalance in the Body and Mind”

April 9, 2018

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Hi, this is Eliot Tokar in my continuing series on Tibetan medicine for Tricycle. In my first video lecture I spoke about the relationship between dharma and medicine and began to explain the history of Tibetan medicine. We discussed how Tibetan medicine creates a means for understanding health and the causes of illness and disease by creating a model of the laws of nature. I explained that Tibetan medicine describes a model of health that's based upon our body's three principle functions.

Understanding our body, health, and the causes of illness can also assist in our spiritual practice. Buddhists see spiritual ignorance as a disease and dharma as medicine. In Buddhism, we believe that to be reborn or reincarnated as a human is a “precious human rebirth” because it gives the opportunity to take spiritual teachings and do spiritual practices that could lead toward enlightenment. In that case, health is a key to our spiritual path.

Working with one's attachments is of great importance in dharma practice. Tibetan medicine defines one of the three principles of physical function and health as a correlate of our capacity for attachment. That principle is called *lung*, sometimes translated as wind, and it represents the body's quality of circulation and movement. Our capacity for attachment, desire, or a materialist worldview manifests as lung.

As I explained in the first video, Tibetan medicine talks about the nature and quality of things, their characteristics, and lung has certain characteristics as well. It can be coarse, light, cold, subtle, hard, or mobile. Lung pervades the whole body, but especially acts in the head, chest, lungs, throat, mouth, nasal cavity, heart, shoulders, arms, hands, stomach, intestines, colon, bladder, and the reproductive organs.

Lung, the wind element, creates all movement and circulation in the body. It creates the movement of matter, like blood and the digestive nutrition of our food; the circulation of true

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energy, that is the nervous system and brain functions; and the movement of things thought to be insubstantial in the modern context, such as thoughts moving in the mind or circulation within the subtle bodies. It moves through the systems of channels and meridians, which in Tibetan are called *tsa*, and in Sanskrit *nadi*, and the junction points, which in Tibetan are called *khorlo* and in Sanskrit *chakra*.

Lung gives rise to and regulates the circulation of blood, nerve impulses, thoughts in our mind, and of food through the digestive tract. Disturbances in lung can result in many types of illness. These include psychosomatic illnesses, for example what biomedicists call irritable bowel syndrome or inclusion body myositis [an inflammatory muscle disease]; circulatory or heart diseases like high blood pressure; or behavioral or mental illnesses like anxiety and depression. Disturbances in lung can also result in illnesses related to elimination of waste, such as certain types of menstrual problems or constipation. A disturbance in lung can also cause disorders in the nervous system or insomnia.

Lung is particularly important because it is closely linked to the functioning of our mind and consciousness. In fact, it's the basis for the interdependence of body and mind. There are five subcategories of lung, each one residing in a specific part of the body and underlying specific physiological functions. Because the circulatory principle pervades the entire body, there's a resulting interaction between the mind and lung; that interaction is the basis for the interdependence of the mind and body. Physiologically, the movement principle (lung), affects the mind, which in turn also affects circulation in our body. Simply put, lung is the principle by which mental stress has specific physiological effects leading to physical or mental illness. It is why particular behaviors, environments, or dietary habits—like lack of sleep, erratic lifestyle, excessive exposure to cold temperatures, or the overconsumption of stimulants such as sugar or coffee—exacerbate the effects of stress.

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Stress is an important topic, of course. We can say honestly that it's a favorite modern pastime. But what is it? We all know that stress is the basis of a growing number of social and healthcare problems in the modern world, but it's unique because it's caused by a very *individualized* reaction of our mind—and, as a result, our body—to a given situation. It could be best understood by studying the twelve stages of dependent arising, which would have to be a subject for a different video.

Our reaction to a given circumstance is related to our own attachments, sense of perception, expectations, and cultural assumptions. Susceptibility to stress or trauma in a given situation varies from one individual to another. Let's take an extreme example that we can all agree is a stressful situation: war. Despite the fact that this is a very stressful situation, people have very different reactions even to war. Some people can leave a war in reasonable shape; they can resume their lives even if they have bad memories. Many people experience different levels of PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. Some people find their lives shattered.

So, we can also understand that more minor situations—the loss of a job or a relationship, not getting what we think we should have, getting what we think we can't accept, whether they are big things or very small things—can be extremely stressful, mildly stressful, or not stressful at all for different people. Now, why is this problem of stress so pronounced nowadays? Well, modern life is based on increasing forms of materialism, consumerism, and individualism. Even our social media that everyone is engaged in and people are so thrilled with is understood to also result in varieties of social isolation because people are relating to their device rather than to other people. They're living in a very narrowly focused world rather than in a social world.

There are mental health disorders that can result from stress that we're all familiar with, such as depression, anxiety, and insomnia. There are also physical problems that result from stress—for example, many digestive problems such as irritable bowel syndrome, ulcers, circulatory problems like heart disease, and nervous system problems. Problems can be acute, meaning one

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has an immediate reaction to a stressful situation, or chronic, developing over a long period of time as a result of stress.

Herein lies an important principle of Tibetan medicine, which is self-care—the idea of creating balance in our bodies with our lifestyle. There are certain changes we can make in our behavior to alleviate problems related to lung. One is to avoid getting cold. I mentioned that one of the qualities of lung, the circulatory principle, is that it's cool, so one should avoid getting cold and getting chilled inside. It's very important to have regular habits when it comes to things like diet, sleep, and using the toilet.

People must attend to their sleep; it's important to have the proper amount. One should adapt regular and sufficient sleep habits and take naps if needed, even though that can be very hard nowadays. Also, one should avoid social isolation if at all possible. Keeping the body warm and protected from the cold and wind is beneficial for maintaining balance of lung or dealing with a lung disease. People should have regular meal times. It doesn't have to be exactly on the dot, but try to eat at particular times of the day. The average reasonable number of meals is about three to five meals a day.

Exercises with an emphasis on breathing and creating good circulation are very important. Exercise that builds strength is worthwhile and important, but equally worthwhile, especially in regard to lung or the circulation of the body, is building flexibility and endurance. Exercises like yoga, tai chi, and even walking are good for this; any kind of exercise that promotes good breathing and circulation is beneficial.

We should engage in some kind of social life as best as we can with our family, our friends, and our community. And then of course there is great benefit in meditation and giving time to spiritual studies and practice.

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Regarding diet, one should avoid eating overly stimulating foods such as sugar or caffeinated drinks like coffee or tea, especially in excess, to avoid imbalances in the circulatory principle. Although it's somewhat of an individualized issue, it's also good to avoid foods that are hard for us to digest. There are certain foods that harm digestion, for example foods that are burned in cooking or processing. One should not eat a diet that mostly consists of light foods such as salads or raw foods exclusively; such foods are not recommended in the case of [restoring a] lung imbalance. We can also add certain foods to our diet. For example, add foods that are *moderately* sweet (we're not talking about something like sugar). We could eat more foods that have a moderate sour, bitter, or hot taste, and we should eat ingredients that are relatively heavy and nutritious while easy to digest.

One should cook most of their food to be hot or warm. For meat eaters, the diet will involve various forms of animal protein. For vegetarians, it's important to eat a very balanced, nutritious, and especially *varied* diet, without limiting the diet to just one, two, or three foods. One should eat a sufficient amount of whole grains, enough protein in the form of beans or legumes, as well as a variety of vegetables. One could eat specific foods that are heavy, nutritious, or warming, like oatmeal or avocado, and one could use spices like nutmeg, clove, asafetida, or garlic. Tibetan medicine also thinks that, in certain cases, moderate use of alcoholic beverages can be used by those who tolerate them well. For physical therapy, massage is often used in cases of lung imbalance, especially with oil and sometimes combined with herbs.

My teacher Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche also taught a simple meditation focusing on the sky that is especially effective in situations where one experiences something like anxiety or depression. We start off sitting straight on a cushion on the floor or in a chair. Next, it's important to breathe properly, which means breathing from the lower chakra in the diaphragm, not simply from the lungs. Take a deep breath first from here [points near diaphragm], and then upward, upstairs, here [points to upper chest, just below the throat].

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Breathe calmly and normally. If you have a more advanced practice, you could do a breath purification practice prior to this. If you live in a place where you can look out your window and see the sky uninterrupted, you can do that. If not, you can close your eyes and visualize the clear blue sky with no clouds in it. Notice that the sky has no definition. It has no beginning or end. It's an unlimited expanse.

So sit, visualize the sky, and come to a calm place. Of course thoughts will arise in your mind. Don't grasp onto the thoughts. Let them arise and pass away. But in this case, if one is being troubled with these feelings of anxiety or depression or the like, as negative thoughts arise in the mind, visualize them leaving through the top of the head and entering into the sky and allow them to diffuse into the sky until only the sky remains.

For a visual example, imagine you see a chimney with smoke coming out. When it initially comes out, it can be quite thick and white, black, or gray. This smoke is like your negative thoughts. But the smoke diffuses very quickly as it enters the sky, and all you see is a blue expanse. Do this meditation for a period of time until you feel yourself calming down. You can do it as often as you need to. The sky meditation is very simple. Everyone can do it at home, whether you're an experienced practitioner with complicated practices or someone with no experience in meditation at all.

In our next video, we'll talk more about the main principles of function in Tibetan medicine. I hope this video has been helpful for you to learn about the way your body functions, especially the interdependence between body and mind, and the behaviors that we can take to improve our health.