

Eliot Tokar

*Tibetan Medicine: Ancient Wisdom for Modern Health and Healing*

Week Three: “Treating Anger by Balancing Inner Heat”

April 16, 2018

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Hello, I’m Eliot Tokar, a traditional Tibetan medicine doctor practicing here in New York. This is the third video in my series about Tibetan medicine. In our first video I gave a general introduction to Tibetan medicine. In our second video, we started to talk about Tibetan medicine’s three principles of function, specifically *lung*, the circulatory principle. This week we're going to continue by talking about the second principle of function.

We increasingly see examples of aggression, anger, and frustration affecting our society, as well as our lives and health. Modern media can circulate anger and frustration instantly throughout the world and multiply their effects. Media also multiplies the extent to which stress has become so prevalent in too many people’s lives.

Finding ways to understand and work with these strong impulses is a key challenge for dharma practitioners. What we have to understand is that dharma practice is not something simply for retreats or for spas. I’ve had patients tell me, “Well, I could do this and that practice or calm my mind down when I’m on vacation.” But the Buddha left his easy, perfect life to experience suffering and develop the practices that we all study and try to practice.

In keeping with this, Tibetan medicine’s second principle of health is called *tripa*, sometimes translated as “bile.” *Tripa*, or the concept behind it, recognizes how physiological heat acts as the basis for life and health, but when imbalanced it is the cause of illness in both the body and mind.

Understanding the principles of health allow us to achieve greater balance in our body and mind, especially as we pursue a spiritual path. Tibetan medicine puts forth the idea that developmentally, our capacity to express aggression, anger, and frustration or resentment manifests as the second principle of function, or *tripa*. *Tripa* is based on the fire element that I described in the first video, and as a result it manifests heat in the body. Heat is clearly essential

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for life. If we don't have sufficient heat in our body, we can't survive. But if the heat is too much, we can't survive. So balance is very key once again.

Heat has different characteristics. As I've explained, Tibetan medicine is a qualitative method of natural medicine that evaluates things based on their nature or characteristics. What is heat? I don't have to explain it to you. Everyone watching this video knows what heat is the minute I say the word. In terms of its qualities, heat rises, expands, and creates dynamic activity that is important for physical function and life.

Tripa is considered to be oily, sharp, hot, light, malodorous (having a bad smell), purgative, and wet. Although it functions in many parts of the body, it mainly acts in the functions of the liver and the gallbladder. It also has a role in the stomach, small intestine, colon, eyes, sinus, and in our skin.

Tripa balances the cool and cold nature of lung and *bagen*, which I'll discuss in the last video. It gives rise to and controls functions such as digestion, especially in regards to metabolism and assimilation—how the body takes the digestive part of the food, its nutritional essence, and converts it to things that we need like blood, flesh, fat, bone, bone marrow, and reproductive fluids. Because it assists in the production of blood, it's also very key for the liver and the gallbladder, as I mentioned. It's involved in the functioning of our sinuses and our vision and it maintains the skin and our complexion. In relation to our mind, it allows the function of discriminating intellect and helps us manifest a sense of self, maintain our feelings, interest, activity, willpower, pride, and ego, and gives us a sense of alertness. When imbalanced, it results in fear, depression, pessimism, self-criticism, and narcissism, as well as a lack of desire, will, or interest.

Understanding what tripa is like and which physiological and mind functions it relates to can let us understand the illnesses that result when it is imbalanced or negatively affected. Imbalance

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can result in indigestion, reflux, the malabsorption of nutrition, ulcers, liver disease, fatigue, arrhythmia, excessive thirst, poor appetite, headaches, several diseases of the eyes, problems with our joints, and skin disorders.

As with lung, there's certain behaviors we can engage in that help us keep the principle of tripa in balance. We should avoid getting overheated. What does that mean? If one gets so hot that one starts to feel great physical discomfort, excessive sweating, feelings of fatigue or lightheadedness, headaches, sinus pain, or things of that nature, that's probably a sign you're getting overheated. At those times, one should try to get into a cooler environment. It's also important that you make sure you get enough rest when you are stressed and have too much heat in the body.

If one experiences a lot of feelings of aggression, anger, or frustration, that is a sign of tripa imbalance. Of course spiritual studies and practice are a key way to put things in perspective. Meditation is also particularly effective in dealing with this kind of problem; if practiced reasonably, properly, and with proper instruction, we all know what enormous benefits meditation can have.

We've seen the expansion of interest in things like mindfulness. However, Tibetan medicine understands that meditation engages the physical principles very directly, which is one of the reasons it has this power. Meditation is not done properly if one has too much of a sense of attachment or desire and thinks, *I have to achieve this. This has to be done at a certain time. I have to do this. I must see this, achieve this, have this power.* If it's done with a sense of aggression or frustration it can affect the central channel of the body that resides behind the heart and cause actual mental illness. I've seen several patients with this problem. This is not really a caveat about meditation. We don't need to run home and worry about this if we've been meditating, but [I make this point] to further illustrate the point that all things have a nature and

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quality; even meditation needs to be respected in terms of what it is, what it does for us, and how we can approach it both internally and externally.

Now let's think about our diet. There are things we should avoid if we have a tripa imbalance, too much heat in the body, or we're going through a difficult time that tries us with anger, frustration etc. We should avoid things like meat, eggs, especially any kind of sheep's milk products, heavy fats like butter, excessive amounts of fats and oils, fried food, heating foods like salt, sea peppers, and black and white pepper, garlic, mustard, radishes, celery, watercress, raw onions, peanuts, avocado, mango, sesame, molasses, and all types of alcoholic beverages.

One can add to one's diet foods that are moderately sweet, which again does not mean sugar. Add foods with moderately sweet, bitter, astringent, and cooling tastes. For example, foods like like beans and lentils, potatoes, artichoke, and turnips. Then add bitter vegetables and greens such as escarole, dandelion, endive, chicory, and many forms of leafy green vegetables. Ingredients like kale, collard greens, and parsley are especially good for liver function. Spices such as cumin, coriander, and fenugreek can be quite good, and yogurt and buttermilk can be consumed as long as they're from a cow or goat milk source.

This again brings up this key issue when talking about Tibetan medicine, which is understanding the importance of maintaining balance and working from a standpoint of holism. Very often nowadays—too often—when we are seeking better health, even with natural medicine, we think in a mode that is too individualized and consumer-oriented. We think that if we just buy the right products or buy the right supplements this will make us healthy. If that doesn't happen, though, it can be quite angering for many people. I've actually seen patients who've come to me with quite serious illnesses who felt cheated because they bought the right product, they bought the right supplement, but they didn't get the result that they wanted.

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Health is not achieved through simple consumerism. It's achieved through understanding, learning, and by being able to embody in one's day-to-day life some reasonable degree of balance and holistic practice. This kind of holistic approach also shows how Tibetan medicine works.

The patient, the person who is seeing the Tibetan doctor and getting the diagnosis and treatment, needs to take an active role in their treatment. They have to participate. They have to do as best as possible, within reason, to modify their behavior and their diet, along with taking other kinds of treatments like medicines or physical therapies. This is quite different from the normal level of compliance or more passive action which is used in dealing with typical biomedical treatments.

Let's think again about the contrast between Tibetan medicine and biomedicine. Biomedicine has enormous effectiveness and power because its treatments can strongly affect or suppress certain problems to alter the function of the body or eliminate certain causes of disease. Tibetan medicine simply functions differently. If we give any kind of treatment, diet, or behavioral advice, especially medicines and physical therapies, what are we seeking to do? We're seeking to reestablish balance or homeostasis based on our understanding of the laws of nature and the way that the body functions.

We're trying to enhance function, to elevate it in some way, and most importantly to restore normal function and balance. When one studies Tibetan medicine the first thing you study is the healthy body. This brings up another point. As one learns about natural medicine or Tibetan medicine, or is taking a Tibetan medical treatment, learning is very important; it is important to make the connection between how our body is functioning and our emotional state.

I remember seeing a patient at a big dharma center years ago who was one of the heads of the center. He had severe circulatory and neurological symptoms. I was asking him about his meditation practice, which was quite extensive, but the problem was that he hadn't made the connection between that practice and his life. It was almost like he was doing it as an

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externalization of something. I simply had to explain to him that if he was doing the practice, what was important was not the quantity but the quality.

Here is another important issue. In the West we often think that being analytic or discriminating and being intuitive or thinking from a more heart-based point of view are somehow at odds with each other. In the West, analytical thinking is often emphasized and intuition is perhaps deemphasized, and we feel we must pick one above the other. In Tibetan medicine, in dharma for that matter, maintaining a discriminating mind while also making proper use of intuition is very important.

We'll finish this video with something very simple that I touched on at the end of the second video. The most simple and inexpensive way to improve your health, both immediately and overall, is to focus on the breath. This is especially true with dealing with problems of lung as I described in the second video and now tripa, or heat, in the third video.

Really think about this. We should try to breathe naturally and well, not just when we're meditating but all the time. We should be trying to practice breathing well several times a day if possible. Try to maintain deep breathing in the diaphragm; breathe from the lower chakra and then in the lungs. If you have trouble practicing that, I recommend lying down—when you sleep, you breathe in this way.

If you focus on developing natural breath, you'll be able to do an enormous amount for your physical health and your mental wellbeing in a very simple, inexpensive fashion. Starting with these basic steps in behavior and in diet can not only preclude illness or the need for things like medicine or physical therapies, but it can help us maintain our best health throughout our lives.