

Eliot Tokar

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

Week Four: “Diet, Digestion, and Tibetan Medicine’s Final Principle Function”

April 23, 2018

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Hi, this is Eliot Tokar. I'm a traditional Tibetan medicine doctor practicing here in New York City, and this is the fourth and final video in my series on Tibetan medicine. In the first video we talked about the basics of Tibetan medicine. In the second video we discussed the first principle, that of the body's circulation, called *lung*. In the third video we discussed *tripa*, the heat principle. Now, in our fourth video, we're going to talk a little bit about the final principle of functioning.

Let us first consider this: the key to Buddhist teachings is appreciating the role ignorance plays in the creation of suffering. In Tibetan medicine, ignorance is understood to be the most basic cause of the thousands of forms of illness and disease that it describes and seeks to treat. The third principle of function of the body and mind is *badken*, sometimes translated as “phlegm.” It is a manifestation of the capacity to lack basic awareness. Developmentally, the mind expresses ignorance or incomprehension as *badken*.

*Badken* is composed of the earth and water elements, which I explained in our first video. *Badken* has the earth element's quality of firmness and stability and provides the basis of physical existence and development. Water, on the other hand, creates moisture and gives rise to all fluids. *Badken* is oily, cool, heavy, smooth, stable, and damp. It has most influence over the chest, throat, lungs, brain, muscles, glands and body tissues in the stomach, the spleen, kidney, bladder, small intestines, colon, tongue, head, and joints. It creates the physical principle whereby energy can be utilized and bring stability to our body and mind. It provides the body's lubrication. It breaks down food at the initial stages of digestion.

A *badken* imbalance can cause a lack of appetite, pain in the back of the chest, reflux, malabsorption of nutrients, belching, stomach pain, loss of taste and appetite, vertigo, a buildup of mucus in the sinus or the lungs, and pain and inflammation in the joints. In the mind, it can

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cause things such as depression or sluggishness, confusion, anorexia, bulimia, mental dullness, or anhedonia [lack of interest].

You might be noticing there are certain disorders that could be caused by any of the three principles of function. That is because the principles all work somewhat interactively or interdependently in the body. It’s also because different issues (for example, indigestion, depression, or joint pain) can have different causes, which I touched on in our first video when I discussed differential diagnosis or individualized diagnosis. We distinguish between different patients with the same biomedical diagnosis by understanding the nature of the illness as individualized in each patient.

What behaviors can we pursue to help us resolve imbalance in badken? We should avoid getting really cold or constantly being cold. We should especially avoid getting cold around the waist and hips because the kidneys are very related to this function. Avoid oversleeping; many people deprive themselves of sleep and then they oversleep, which causes causes sluggishness and badken buildup. It’s beneficial to exercise and get good physical activity.

Regarding diet, we should avoid cold and chilled foods. Cold and chilled foods are very popular, especially in the United States, and perhaps increasingly in global consumer culture. These foods are quite detrimental to digestion and the idea that they keep you cool when it’s hot out is not quite accurate. One doesn’t have to look to Tibetan medicine to understand that—it’s quite well discussed. We should largely avoid cold and chilled foods, and especially avoid eating them in large quantity. We can avoid other foods that are cooling like pork, goat meat or goat milk products; the nightshade vegetables like bell peppers, raw tomatoes, eggplant, and cucumbers; yams, turnips, and—everyone’s favorites—sugar and artificial sweeteners.

There are things we can add to the diet to address badken imbalance in line with the principle of holism. We should try to consume foods with moderately hot, sour, astringent, and stimulative

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qualities. We could try to drink boiled water. In most Asian countries people drink lots of boiled water, especially around meals and in the morning and evening because it helps with digestion. At the beginning it sounds kind of boring but once you start doing it you feel so good that you keep it up. Other warming foods are honey, fish, pomegranate, ginger, sheep's milk products, radishes, millet, and many other foods like these.

In terms of physical therapy, heating and stimulating treatments like massage, especially massage with oil, are used often. Treatments like moxibustion, which most commonly uses heated *Artemisia* [a family of plants], and other techniques are used to create heat directly on the skin in meridian points that relate to the illness. Certain kinds of hot baths are also good. Of course you could take a hot bath at home, but there are medicinal baths as well.

Let's have a very serious discussion about digestion. Digestion is one of the greatest keys to good health, and maintaining or restoring good digestion is very important. One area of digestion that people have become very interested in—and in some cases obsessed with—is the issue of gluten. Some people have Celiac disease in which they're allergic to gluten, while others can eat gluten without any problems. There's a huge number of people who have recently decided that gluten is a problem for them, but this is really a kind of digestive disorder more than it is a gluten disorder. Of course, there are also agricultural and agro-business issues that are reasonably brought up, but the sudden spades of people who are unable to digest basic foods, like gluten, are based on problems with digestion. For example, I find a fair number of patients I've seen develop indigestion from eating foods that are otherwise quite healthy, but the way that they're eating and combining them can weaken digestion.

Foods that can harm digestion include yogurt, especially when eaten cold or combined with sweets or nuts; light diets and cooling diets consisting mostly of salads, especially salads with old meat mixed into them like they buy in salad bars; smoothies; and energy bars, which could have a lot of nutrients but are hard to digest.

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What are the components of digestion? First, chewing breaks down the food before it moves to the stomach. The next most important part is separating the nutrition from the waste. Next, that nutrition is converted into seven constituents that the body requires: blood, flesh, fat, bone, bone marrow, and the reproductive fluids. The final step, if the nutrition and waste are properly separated, is eliminating the waste via feces, urine, or sweat.

Now let's look at the three stages of digestion relative to the three principles of function or *nyepa*—lung, tripa, and badken. The first digestive stage takes place principally from the mouth to the upper part of the stomach, where badken breaks down the food. The tripa digests in the stomach and filters that digestive essence that we've discussed. The digested food reaches the intestines where the final food digestion takes place. Then the lung, which is like fire, absorbs and transports the nutrition to the liver, through the veins, and into the body. Finally, the waste is eliminated via the lung that moves downward in the obvious ways we've discussed.

What should you expect if you see a doctor of Tibetan medicine? First they will observe you; there are many things one could observe about a patient. In many ways medicine is a deductive process. It's a little bit like what Sherlock Holmes does. The doctor observes many signs about the person—the way they speak, their appearance, their complexion, etc. Next, the doctor should talk to the patient. Many doctors work very fast with patients in traditional Asian medicine overall and even in Tibetan medicine. My teacher Dr. Trogawa Rinpoche felt that talking to the patient is very important because it provides an understanding of that person's personal experience of the illness, which adds to a more accurate diagnosis.

Next, the doctor will feel the radial artery of each wrist with three fingers of each of their hands. Each half of the three fingers detects the functioning of an individual organ system. For example, on the first digit of the left hand are the lungs and large intestine, on the second digit are the liver and gallbladder, and on the third are the right kidney and bladder. On the first digit of the right

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hand are the heart and small intestine, on the second are the spleen and stomach, and on the third are the left kidney and reproductive organs. (That first digit—that which detects the lungs and large intestine, and the heart and small intestine—changes sides between men and women.)

Next, the doctor will look at a urine sample. In Tibetan medicine it is thought that urine, an important end product of digestion, carries with it many characteristics that, if read properly, tell an enormous amount about what is going on inside the body. The components or metrics that are examined in the urine sample include the color, the odor, the viscosity, the way bubbles form or disappear when the sample is mixed, deposits that appear in the sample, where they appear, deposits that appear on the surface, the extent to which the sample is clear, cloudy, or opaque, and many other things.

The doctor will look at your eyes, especially the white sclera part of the eye, to look for specific signs or to confirm the diagnosis. Additionally, one could look at the tongue for formations, deposits, cracks, or other kinds of anomalies. This is a typical medical approach; all types of medicine use various kinds of observation and tests to both make and then confirm a diagnosis. In terms of treatment, as we’ve discussed already, the first level of treatment should be diet, and then behavior. If just diet or behavior are sufficient one doesn’t need any other kind of treatment.

Nowadays people often focus on supplements, pills, and medicines. These are important tools, but diet and behavior are the key to maintaining good health and alleviating illness. If behavior and diet aren’t sufficient, Tibetan medicine has a huge number of herbal compounds to use as well as physical therapies like massage, its own unique system of acupuncture, heating treatments on the skin as I’ve described, and many other things.

I advise that if you see a Tibetan doctor, or for that matter if you see any sort of traditional Asian medicine doctor, please ask for your diagnosis. The doctor might not speak English well, but having an understanding of what the doctor is seeing and diagnosing will greatly enhance your

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ability to do something about your health, without becoming dependent on things like pills. It's also a way to educate yourself about balance. I will emphasize that we're talking about a responsive model of healthcare, meaning one that's first based on a concept of health, as opposed to a more reactive, disease-based model, the type we're more familiar with nowadays.

Self-care requires that you take responsibility for yourself. I don't mean that in a vague sense, but that you must actually do things day-to-day to help balance your health as best as possible, and not just take a ‘pop-a-pill’ type of approach. I have seen that the ability to adapt properly to the treatment has an enormous effect on my patients. For example, I have one patient—a lady in her early 60s—who came to me with collagenous colitis [an inflammatory bowel disease]. She had been told by her doctor that she would have to look constantly for a bathroom for the rest of her life. After working very hard, learning how to take care of herself, and taking some herbal treatments, she's since moved on. Now she has a very full life.

I would advise you to avoid food fads and other kinds of consumerist approaches to health. There isn't just one approach that will work for you; there are many products, supplements, and diets that can help you. Educating yourself about your health is key. When looking at foods, nutritional data can be very meaningful. It certainly has an *in vitro*, laboratory meaning, but in contrast to looking at how a whole food can affect the body, sometimes that truth becomes a truism. As the food writer Michael Pollan points out, this “nutritionalism” [a paradigm focusing exclusively on food's nutrients] can be confusing, so you need to understand what you're doing.

Nowadays when we think about medicine we think about a professional and technical field, and for many centuries medicine was practiced by doctors and medical professionals. But such professionals aren't always available to the average person. It is very important to remember that for many centuries medical and healthcare knowledge was passed down through society in groups and families by those who weren't medical experts, often mothers and grandmothers.

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I remember a story from years ago when I was studying with an accomplished Asian doctor. He had seen an Irish immigrant patient who had a very serious life-threatening illness. While the doctor was prescribing changes that she needed adopt in her behavior and diet—prescriptions based on Asian systems and culture—she started to cry. I asked her later why she cried—was she just afraid of dying from the illness? “No,” she said. “These are things my grandmother used to teach us. But we came to America and we felt we had to become like everyone else so we put all that aside. And now here I am with a serious illness, and this man is telling me I have to learn what I should have known all along.”

If there are older members in your family or your community who have this knowledge, if there are diaries or journals from your grandmother or great-grandmother, go look at them. Try to learn and preserve some of this knowledge. This is very important because in the end the preservation of traditional medical knowledge from the folk level, the grassroots level, is really essential and, in many ways, now threatened. Maintaining diversity of knowledge and practice is essential. The new movement to standardization, though it might sound very nice, is actually a death knell to the diversity that has provided us with wisdom passed down through the centuries. So please, fight for diversity, fight to maintain knowledge, and work against ignorance. Thank you very much.