

## Etiology of illness in traditional Bhutanese medicine

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### ABSTRACT

According to the philosophy of traditional Bhutanese medicine, ignorance (Ma-Rig-Pa) is considered as the main cause of all diseases of mankind. However, other factors such as seasons, psychiatric emotions, behaviour and dietary habits also acts as the triggering agents. This paper is a narrative review based on the medical text of traditional medicine (Sowarigpa) and religious text available in the country. All the medical text states that our defective mind (ignorance) is the main source of all kinds of ailments in the living beings. Due to ignorance, we the human beings are unable to see the real phenomenon and therefore leading to enclosed knowledge of oneself, which in turn gives rise to the three mental poisons; attachment, anger and delusion. Ignorance is the ultimate source of these three mental poisons which compel people to follow wrong lifestyle that disturb the balance of the three humours – wind, bile and phlegm. Thus, in turn gives rise to the four hundred and four different types of diseases as described in gSo-ba Rig-pa.

**Keywords:** Delusion; Five elements; gSo-ba Rig-pa; Humours; Ignorance; Psychology.

### INTRODUCTION

gSo-ba Rig-pa, the Bhutanese traditional medicine is an ancient medical practice that is based on Buddhist philosophy, untouched by modern medicine techniques. It explains that any kind of disease affecting living beings is caused by the untamed mind (ignorance). This mind is considered to be the ultimate source of all ailments. Ignorance gives rise to the three mental poisons which in turn give rise to the affliction of the three bodily humours – wind (rLung), bile (Khris-pa) and phlegm (Bad-kan) disorders. These three humours give positive health when they are in a well balanced state and bring illness when the balance is disrupted.

Attachment or desire (Dod-Chag) mainly talks about the physical needs and unwholesome activities, which give rise to wind disorder. Anger or hatred (Zhe-dang) on the other hand is generated by feelings such as jealousy, pride, selfishness and the mental attitude which states “I am right and others are always wrong”, resulting in the bile disorder. Delusion or closed mindedness (Ti-mug) leads to the feeling of laziness and procrastination. Hence phlegm disorder generally arises as a result of sluggishness or inactive or sedentary lifestyle. In addition, climatic conditions, seasons and psychiatric emotions act as triggering factors allowing the three mental poisons to cause illness. Wrong life style is the ultimate products of the three mental poisons which are the main cause for the development of various diseases. Based on this concept of etiology of illness, diseases known to mankind are identified in gSo-ba Rig-pa, the traditional medicine practiced in Bhutan to this day.

### Etiology of illness

The etiology of diseases is mainly based on the Buddhist approach of the mind and the body. The diseases are manifested from the

three bodily humours because of wrong diet & behaviour, un healthy emotions and unusual climatic changes. In gSo-ba Rig-pa, there are mainly three categories of causes of illness; distant, near and immediate causes. The first two causes are within one self, while the third one is the main cause of all non-communicable diseases that afflicts human health. The three causes of illness are as described in the following section:

#### 1. Distant cause

The distant cause refers to the psychological state of mind (ignorance). In context to Traditional Medicine philosophy, ignorance (Ma-Rig-Pa) means a person lacking knowledge on the non-existence of the word “I”. Human beings are unable to get rid of ignorance which is deeply embedded within them. Because of this ignorance one cannot see the real phenomenon, which in turn gives rise to the three mental poisons - attachment, anger and delusion. Therefore, it is the ignorance and the three mental poisons which together give rise to the illnesses and sufferings in the human beings.

#### 2. Near cause

Near cause explains about the three mental poisons, which gives rise to the affliction of the three humours. These are mainly attributed to wrong dietary habits and undesirable behaviour as explained in the following sections:

##### i. Dod-chag

Desire or attachment (Dod-chag) is the principal cause of sorrow and the strongest kind of desire is basically related to physical needs and desires. Attachment leads to power, jealousy, anger and dissatisfaction which increases rLung the heart, colon and lower regions of the body. Therefore attachment is the principal cause of all psychological problems resulting from the physical rLung disorders, which leads to depression and psychiatric problems.

##### ii. Zhedang

Zhe-dang is the emotion of anger which is destructive state of

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mind. It destroys the peace and harmony of oneself and others as well. It manifests as self pride, power, stupidity and fear etc, lastly landing up in depression. It is also one of the main causes of psychological state of aggression, violence, vengefulness and physical bile disorder, such as inflammation and pyrexia disorders. Organs such as liver, gall bladder and other abdominal regions of the body are the ones producing body heat, which translates into anger, the destroyer of happiness and wellbeing.

**iii. Ti-mug**

Delusion or Closed mindedness also known as Ti-mug, literally means lack of wisdom and this mental poison is aggravated as a result of persistent anger, which stops one’s ability to be aware and judgemental and automatically falling into darkness. This produces doubt, fear, ignorance, delusion, lack of awareness and selfish action. Closed mindedness is the root of all miseries and negative karma. Human brain is composed of Ti- mug from which the sensory consciousness, emo- tion arises and dissolves. Due to this, one tends to become psychologically inactive, physically feeling heavy with weak memory resulting in development of phlegm disorder. All function of the sense organs depends upon the function of the brain, the main power house of the body. Because of the deluded mind, one tries to accomplish work just for the sake of completing without knowing the consequences.

**Table 1. States of humours with change in seasons**

		Seasons in Bhutan					
		Chi-ka (early spring) Feb-March	Soe-kha (late spring) April-May	Yar-ka (summer) June-July	Toen-ka (Autumn) Aug- Sept	Guen-toe (Early winter) Oct-Nov	Guen-med (late winter) Dec-Jan
Humours	Wind	Accumulates		Manifest	Pacify		
	Bile			Accumulates	Manifest		Pacify
	Phlegm	Manifest	Pacify		Accumulates		

instance eating wrong foods and engaging in wrong behaviour will manifest the accumulated humours causing illness. Wrong dietary habits and inappropriate behaviour are also powerful factors resulting in sickness.

**ii. Psychological emotions**

One’s mind status and emotions also plays a very important role for illness. It is rightly said that all happiness and unhappiness is manifested from within, that is mind. The ill person will experience negative emotions, fear, anxiety, misunderstanding, doubt, heart weakening, strong superstition etc, automatically leading to disturbed mind and vice versa. Disturbed mind directly leads to wrong perception and produce psychological disorders in brief which is considered as Doen or Semkham in Sowarigpa.

**3. Immediate cause**

The immediate causes are the factors that can produce signs and symptoms directly after having taken or encountered wrong food, unfavourable climate, unhealthy emotions and behaviours. For example, taking large amount of salt and consuming alcohol causes hypertension, drunk driving causes road accidents, consumption of alcohol causes liver failure and lungs cancer is caused by smoking. Following factors are some of the immediate cause of illness in humans.

**i. Climate (Due)**

Change of outer climate directly influences the three humours of the body. Therefore natural climate and seasonal changes lead to a natural cycle of changes in the three humours and their energies. In concept of Traditional Medicine, seasons are divided into six, chid-ka (early spring), Soe-kha (late spring), Yar-ka (summer), Toen-ka (autumn), Guen-toe (early winter) and Guen-med (late winter). For an example a wind humour naturally accumulates in earlyspring and manifests itself in summer and pacified in autumn. Bile humour accumulates in the month of summer, manifests itself in autumn and pacified in winter. Phlegm accumulates in late winter, rises in early spring and is pacified during late spring. If one does not follow the law of nature and its changes, for

**iii. Diet (Zey)**

Healthy food is the main source of all energy required for a healthy body and mind. Unhealthy dietary habits may stimulate the three humours if taken for a long period of time or in excess amount. For example, intake of bitter and astringent taste food as well as unhealthy habits such as smoking, fasting and insufficient eating habits may result in wind disorder. Consumption of citrus fruits like lemons, oranges, plums, dried fruits and fatty foods like butter and meat, alcohol, oily and spicy foods in excess amount is said to increase bile disorder.

Excess intake of raw vegetables like onion, tomatoes, drinking cold tea and milk of goat, in general excess intake of sweet and bitter food along with surplus oil increases risk of phlegm disorder.

