

Principle of nutrition and dietetics in sowa rigpa

Sonam Choda¹

¹Tsimalakha Hospital, Chukha, Bhutan

ABSTRACT

All living beings need food to live. It is a means of good life, health, and wellness. Inappropriate food will cause diseases and at the same time, food is the first medication against diseases. Just like anything in the universe, food is made of five elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space. A balanced diet should contain all of the five elements. Although all plants contain these five elements, the varying ratios found in different plants make the six tastes: Sweet, Salty, Sour, Bitter, Pungent, and Astringent. A different taste has different functions in our body. Deficiency or an excess of a particular taste in food results in an imbalance of the three humours, causing diseases. As we have different nature of body constitution: Wind, Bile and Phlegm, the requirement for food varies from individual to individual.

Keywords: Five elements; Nutrition; Sowa rigpa; Three humour.

INTRODUCTION

Every year millions of people in the world either die or have unhealthy mind and body from the lack of knowledge on dietetics. Sowa Rigpa, a Traditional Medicine practiced in Bhutan for centuries believes healthy nutrition nourishes the mind, body, and soul. An individual is a microcosm within a macrocosm. In other words, as a microcosm one is constantly under the influence of vast environmental transformations. This means each individual has an exclusive biochemical world that influences how it functions, thinks, reacts, senses, talks and lives. What may be nurturing and advantageous to one may not be to another.

Food is any substance that can be metabolized by three different digestive fires to give energy and build tissues. Life that nourishes mind and body is fully dependent on bodily tissues, and bodily tissues are dependent on the three digestive fires. And digestive fires are dependent on types of food.

As it is very difficult to understand the principles of diet of Sowa Rigpa from the western point of view, this paper gives an insight of the physiology of a human body and the principles of nutrition from a Sowa Rigpa standpoint.

Five Great Elements

According to Sowa Rigpa, anything in this universe, including the body, comprises five elements: Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Space. In medicinal herbs and food, the Great Elements represent taste, potency, post-digestive effect and qualities. In the body, the Great Elements are represented in the forms of humours, tissues and waste.

Earth gives the foundation, Water keeps it wet, Fire provides heat, Wind lets it move and grow and the Space gives the space to grow. In a healthy body these Elements are in a state

of balance. Owing to many internal and external variant factors such as negligent lifestyle choices, how the body is maintained, age, environment, season, psychological state etc, the inherent ratio of the Elements become imbalanced. The body's natural tendency is to maintain equilibrium and it does so by eliminating any excess Elements and trying to acquire those that are depleted. The shortage of Elements is usually replenished through diet and behavior like exercise and exposure to heat and cold.

Three Humours

Humours are energetic forces that form and govern the function of the body. The individual constitution is made up of three basic humours comprising of five sub-humours each. The humours are made up of the great five elements. Wind is made up of space and air and resides in the lower part of the body. Bile is made up of fire and water and resides in the middle part of the body. Phlegm is made up of earth and water and resides in the upper part of the body.

Wind is the subtle flow of energy circulating throughout the body carrying blood and nutrients. It also helps the respiratory system, sensory organs and bodily growth. It separates nutrients and waste products in our body. Its main function is to carry the movements of mind, speech and body. Movements and activities such as stretching and walking are performed by this energy. The Wind humour has six characteristics, which are coarseness, lightness, coldness, subtlety, hardness and mobility.

The main function of Bile is to keep in balance the bodily temperature, to aid digestion and absorption, and to give vitality to the body. It is also responsible for feeling hungry and thirsty at the right times. It gives luster to the skin and boosts mental capacity by providing us with courage and sense of determination. Bile humour has seven qualities: it is oily, sharp, hot, light, has a strong odor, is purgative, and moist.

The main function of Phlegm is to balance our bodily fluids, to help mix food in the stomach, keep the mind stable and lubricate our joints. Phlegm has seven characteristics: it is oily (with wetness), cool, heavy, blunt, smooth, stable and sticky.

Corresponding author:

Sonam Choda

chodasonam@gmail.com

Seven Body Constituents

The body is actually constructed by the seven body constituents: chile, blood, muscle, fat, bones, bone marrow and reproductive fluids. They protect and form the body shape and give strength. Chile (food essence) nurtures the other six bodily constituents. Blood sustains life, and supplies nutrients to all tissues and organs. Muscles cover the body and organs internally and externally. Fat maintains the lubrication and oiliness of organs and tissues. Bones form the structure of the body and produce strength. Bone marrow nourishes all organs and systems. Reproductive fluid contains vitality and reproductive processes.

Three Waste Products

Excretion of the food after the digestion also plays an important role in sustaining the body constituents and other waste products in the human body. There are three major waste products in general: faeces, urine, and perspiration.

Taste

Sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent are the six-fold tastes. Though all the plants emanate from all five elements and should contain all the tastes, the content of elements in a plant will give one taste and in some case, more. Sweet is the result of earth and water, sour is the result of earth and fire, salty is the result of water and fire, pungent is the result of air and fire, bitter is the result of air and space, finally astringent is the outcome of air and earth.

Sweet, sour, and salt in general will alleviate wind; bitter, sweet, and astringent will alleviate bile; pungent, sour, and salt alleviate phlegm.

Sweet promotes life as a whole, provides overall strength, luster to the skin, and is good for the throat. However, excessive use will aggravate Phlegm and digestive fire.

Sour taste stimulates digestive fire, provides energy, awakens the mind and stimulates salivation. Yet, excessive use will aggravate bile and cause heartburn, and water retention.

Salt acts as an antispasmodic, promotes digestive fire and helps in excretion. The excessive use will give rise to bile and cause dehydration.

Bitter acts as an antipyretic; it tones the pancreas, and reduces fat. It stimulates energy to give strength to body and mind. The excessive use will give rise to wind and phlegm.

Pungent improves appetite, digestion, absorption, aids in reducing fat, and helps in excretion. Yet the excessive use will worsen bile.

Astringent aids in reducing fat, gives luster to the skin and are binding. Excess of it will give rise to phlegm.

Post-digestive effect

Post-digestive effect is the taste that gets transformed after digestion has occurred and there are three tastes as an end result. Foods which are sweet or salty produce sweet taste after digestion, sour remains sour and pungent, bitter and astringent become pungent (Table 1).

Table 1. Taste and the effect of Element

Sl. No.	Element	Taste	Effect
1	Earth+Water	Sweet	Warm
2	Fire+Earth	Sour	Cool
3	Water+Fire	Salty	Warm
4	Water+Wind	Bitter	Cool
5	Fire+Wind	Hot	Warm
6	Earth+Wind	Astringent	Cool

Quality of food/herbs

Food and herbs contain 17 qualities to balance the 20 qualities of the three humours. This means that food has the opposite effect to alleviate humours as shown in the Table 2.

Table 2. Quality of food/herbs and its opposite effect

Sl. No.	Quality of food/herbs	Opposite effect	Humours
1	Soft	Rough	Wind
2	Heavy	Light	Wind
3	Warm	Cool	Wind
4	Oily	Subtle	Wind
5	Firm	Mobile	Wind
6	Cool	Oily/warm	Bile
7	Dull	Sharp	Bile
8	Cold	Hot	Bile
9	Liquid	Hard	Bile
10	Thin	Thick	Bile
11	Dry	Wet	Bile
12	Subtle	Oily	Bile
13	Hot	Cold	Phlegm
14	Light	Heavy	Phlegm
15	Sharp	Dull	Phlegm
16	Rough	Soft	Phlegm
17	Mobile	Firm	Phlegm

Nature

Nature is the food's effect in the digestive tract. Nature acts from the moment the food is touched by the skin, to its presentation into the mouth until elimination from the body. Foods of warm nature stimulate digestive fire whilst those of cooling nature slow it down. Pungent, sour, and salty generally have warm nature and sweet, bitter, and astringent will generally have cooling nature.

Digestion

The digestive process is a central factor in making sure that the five elements are effectively broken down, transformed and absorbed, and waste properly eliminated, for the optimum health of the body's constituents. The seven bodily constituents and three eliminating functions are dependent on the strength of the rate of metabolism.

Digestive Fire in the stomach digests all solid and liquid foods and transforms them into nutrition. The increase and decrease of body and energy, as well as the positive and negative development of humours and constituents depend on the digestive fire.

Table 3. Change of Humours with Season and recommended taste of food

Season	Wind	Bile	Phlegm	Taste
Early winter		↓		Sweet, sour, salty
late winter			↑	Bitter, pungent, astringent
Early spring			↔	Sweet, bitter, astringent
Late Spring	↑		↓	Sweet
Summer	↔	↑		Sweet, sour, salty
Autumn	↓	↔		Sweet, bitter, astringent

↑ *Accumulation*

↓ *Alleviation*

↔ *Aggravation*

The decomposing Phlegm which is located in the stomach breaks down the food into a semi-liquid form. During this process the mixture is turned into froth and its taste is sweet. This sweet mixture is then further digested and absorbed by the digestive Bile which is located in the small intestine. This time, the mixture becomes sour. This is the main stage of digestion and absorption. After this, the fire-like Wind will help to separate the nutrients and waste products in the colon giving nutrients and waste products a bitter taste.

Generally the 2/4th of the stomach should be filled with solid substance, 1/4th with water and the other 1/4th be left empty for space. The amount of food required should be known through its potency of light and heavy.

If the food is taken in a right way, three humours will stay in their own place, the digestion will take place in a right way, the muscle mass will increase, the individual will have appetite for any kind of food, sense organs will function properly, will have a good energy, and excreta will leave the body without giving problems.

Time and Season

Seasonal changes affect the body and mind, with the changes in humours that become accumulated, aggravated and alleviated. Therefore, equilibrium of the humours must be maintained by use of diet and activities (Table 3).

CONCLUSIONS

Wholesome food taken in proper quantity provides strength, vigor, luster to skin, etc. resulting in healthy body and mind while unwholesome food can create many medical complications. Food is one of the primary causes of diseases and at the same time, it is the first and foremost medication advised by the Traditional Physicians to prevent the imbalance of humours according to body constituents and seasons and also to balances the disturbed humours.

This paper would contribute to the ongoing researches on nutrition and dietetics especially for those practicing modern medicine.

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