

An approach to Illnesses by Traditional Medicine of Bhutan: an Introduction

Jigme Singye¹

¹General Hospital, Lhuentse, Bhutan

ABSTRACT

Depending on the different ailments, various diagnostic tools like laboratory tests, X-ray, ultrasound, magnetic resonance imagery, and computerized topography scan are used in modern medicine. However, in Bhutanese traditional medicine the method of diagnosis is based on the medical text of *Sowa-Rigpa*, the ancient practices involving physical examination, questioning, pulsation, palpation and analysis of excretion. These enduring techniques of diagnosis use no modern technologies. The system has been practised in Bhutan for hundreds of years and has been officially establishment in 1967. Insights of this article are compiled from the Buddhist medical text and oral transmission of senior physicians. We discuss diagnosis in three categories namely, visual (*Ta-Wa*), touch (*Reg-Pa*) and questioning (*Dri-Wa*). Visual diagnosis mainly investigates the urine, physical appearance and the tongue. Touch, reading the pulse through which the physician diagnose illnesses. Questioning about the signs and symptoms of the illnesses and past medical history.

Keywords: Diagnosis; *Sowa-Rigpa*; Traditional medicine.

INTRODUCTION

The method of diagnosis in traditional medicine is ancient medical system based on four medical Tantras (*rGyud-bZhi*). The system is based on the Buddhist philosophy and psychology outside the systems of modern medical specialties. In the traditional healthcare, methods of diagnosis are limited to visual examination, touch and questioning.

Visual examination covers the tongue, urine and location of the pain. Touch basically means checking the pulse and palpation. Questions are asked to delve into the patient’s past medical history, diet, behaviour, signs and symptoms.

A subsequent Tanatara of the *Sowa-Rigpa* states that physicians can predict the survival of the patients by reading their pulse¹. Through index, middle and ring fingers the sensations from inner organs are transmitted to the physician.

Through urine analysis physician investigates the colour, vapour, odour, sediments and bubbles, determining cold or heat related disorders.

Building on these basic techniques, this article will further orient the reader on how illness are diagnosed.

Methods of diagnosing

Physicians diagnose illnesses through signs and symptoms of patients. However, they must be very cautious as sometimes, prediction of a rain based on a cloud in the sky can be misleading². Therefore, and physicians must be competent and more attentive. It is necessary to observe the normal functioning of a patient’s five senses for abnormalities of the inner organs, as they are

interconnected and interdependent. For instance, if the patient has dry and sore lips, it means excess heat in spleen; weakness of eyesight, weakness of the liver; hearing problem can be due to disorders with the kidney; dry sore nose due to lung disorder; and difficulty in speech due to disorder in heart. Three methods of diagnosis are explained in details below. The visual observation (*Ta-Wa*), touch (*Reg-Pa*) and questioning (*Dri-Wa*).

Diagnosing through visual observation

Visual observation is further divided into three domains; observation of urine, investigating the eyes, skin and the location of pain and changes in physical appearances.

Diagnosis by visual observation of the tongue

The tongue is one area for diagnosis. Physician rely mainly the color, texture, and physical appearance of the tongue.

Table 1. Physical variation of tongue depends upon the imbalance of three humours^{3-8,12}

Humours	Appearance of tongue
Normal	Reddish-pink, moist texture
Wind disorder (<i>Loong</i>)	Reddish, red spot like pimples, dry, bitter and astringent taste.
Bile disorder (<i>Thri-Pa</i>)	Thick and yellowish coating
Phlegm disorder (<i>Bad-Kan</i>)	Pale, moist, smooth and whitish with thick coating,

Urine analysis

Urine analysis is the most important and precise way to diagnose, as physician can see the imbalance of the humour and disorders with organs. With urine aqueous materials are excreted from the body and it carries many soluble and insoluble ingredients from

Corresponding author:

Jigme Singye
jigmedrukyul@yahoo.com

blood and the urinary tract whereby imparting specific colour, odour and turbidity¹.

Urine analysis is done at three different stages

Stage 1: when the urine is fresh and warm.

Stage 2: When it's cool and stage.

Stage 3: when cold.

Analysis at stage one

The examination is done on the colour, vapour/steam and odour. If the nature of the urine is bluish and clean like spring water, it indicates *Loong* disorder. If the colour is yellow, it indicates *Thri-Pa*. Whitish indicates *Bad-Kan*. Thick vapour and foul odour indicates heat-related and thin vapour with less odour indicates cold-related disorders^{7,8,11}.

Analysis at stage two

When it is cool, typical examination is done for *Kuya* (sediments) and *Trima* (a creamy layer) indicating different ailments. If *Kuya* resembles hair-like structures it indicates *Loong* disorders; resembling tip of hair-like structure indicate *Bad-kan* disorders. Formation of sand-like structures indicates kidney disorders. The amount of *Kuya* in the urine also determines whether heat and cold related illness; greater amount indicates heat and low amount indicate cold disorders. A thick or thin creamy layer on the surface indicates heat or cold related disorders, respectively. If the layer of cream gets broken, it indicates the formation of tumors¹.

Analysis at stage three

Examination is focused on transformation of colour, which determines the ailment. Transforming before the disappearance of steam indicating a heat-related and after disappearance the cold-related. Transforming simultaneously meaning conflict between state of cold and heat.

Urine is stirred and the consistency, the amount of the bubbles, color, smell and sediments are evaluated. Patients have to collect the first urine of the day for the analysis and the patient is also forbidden from drinking alcohol, juice, curd or milk, eating heavy foods and sexual intercourse on the night before the sample is being collected. Those affect the physical and chemical nature of the urine considerably¹¹.

Touch (*Reg-Pa*)

Diagnosis through reading pulse is another means of examination where pulse passes messages between the physician and the illnesses. The time for an effective pulse reading is early hours of the day. The patient should not have moved from their bed and their stomach should be empty¹². However, nowadays it can

be impractical. Pulse reading can be done any time of the day by letting patients to rest for at least ten to fifteen minutes before the pulse is read. The index, middle and ring fingers are placed over the radial artery located below the thumb. Three fingers should be close to one another moderately.

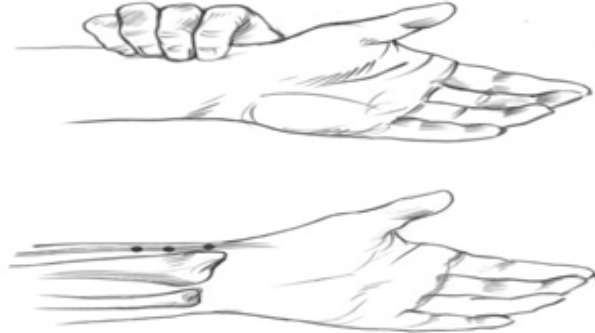


Figure 1. Method of reading pulse

For uniformity of pressure on the artery, the index finger must press lightly as the space underneath is bony⁴. The middle finger must press slightly more as the space is fleshy. The ring finger needs to press much more as the place is more fleshier^{3,6,7,9}.

Diagnosing healthy, cold and heat-related disorder through pulse reading

The relationship between pulse and diagnosis are presented in Table 3. When the physician feels the pulse, a healthy person should have 5 beats of the pulse in one complete cycle of normal physician's breath. If the pulse beat is more than 6, it is diagnosed heat-related disorder and cold related if the beat of pulse is less than 5 times⁹.

Table 1. Physical variation of tongue depends upon the imbalance of three humours^{3-8,12}

Humours	Types of pulse
Wind disorder (<i>Loong</i>)	Empty, floating pulse, arrhythmia
Bile disorder (<i>Thri-Pa</i>)	Full, thin taut and rapid
Phlegm disorder (<i>Bad-Kan</i>)	Deep, slow and weak pulse

Questioning

Interrogation is done based on the following basic five "GANG" questions: *Ganggi*, *Gangtar*, *Gangna*, *Gangdu*, and *Gang*³.

Ganggi: What are the causes of the illnesses? (Diet and behaviour)

The enquiry is done about the diet and behaviour of the patient

in order to know the cause of the illnesses. For instance, intake of bitter, astringent tasting food and unhealthy habits such as smoking, fasting for long, working on an empty stomach, consuming nutrient-poor food for long, improper sleep, unnecessary thinking or talking too much and being under stress or tension are responsible for *Loong* disorders.

Gang tar: What are the symptoms of the illnesses?

Loong disorders will have mainly the following symptoms: unstable mood and mind, yawning, empty vomiting, feeling cold, restlessness and become talkative.

Gang na: Locations of the signs and symptoms?

Tingling of ears, dizziness and neck, shoulder, and lumber pain

Table 4. Signs and symptoms of wind disorder (*Loong*)

Psychological symptoms	Physical symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becomes talkative • Unstable mood and mind • Desire for roaming and stretch limbs • Becomes emotionally sensitive and anxious • Fear and insecure thoughts • Psychologically feeling cold • Insomnia and nightmare 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent yawning • Tingling ear and dizziness • Neck, shoulder and lumber pain • Empty vomiting • Will have diarrhoea or constipation • Feels cold easily • Dry coughing in the morning

Table 5. Signs and symptoms of bile disorder (*Thripa*)

Psychological symptoms	Physical symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling hot • Person becomes impatient • Showing short temper • Feeling weak or tired • Dreams more of fire and sun or red colour • Sleeps more in day time and sleepless nights 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased body temperature • Headache and feels thirsty • Sour and bitter taste • Yellowish Eye and urine • Pain in upper part of body • Faster pulse rate • Yellowish or reddish Faeces and urine. • Will have headache and no appetite

Table 6. Sign and symptoms for phlegm disorder (*Bad-Kan*)

Psychological symptom	Physical symptoms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Losing interest in work and procrastinates • Fatigue • Confused or conflicted mind • Mentally feeling heavy • Feeling weak and slow • Diminishing memory 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Become obese • Poor appetite • Pale Tongue, gum and lip • Slow digestion and low temperature • Pain in the lower back • Feeling tired and heavy sleeping • Joints becomes stiff and pain can be felt • Diminishing memory and taste • More excretion of mucus and saliva

are some of the main locations in body on which the *Loong* mostly have an effect.

Gang du: In which habitat the patients mostly get sick?

If the patients get sick in high altitude and in noisy mass gatherings, it is due to *Loong* disorder.

Gang: In which season or time the patients mainly get sick?

Loong disorders manifest in the early spring and at dawn and evening.

The following tables summarize sign and symptoms of the three humours based on texts^{3-8,12}.

CONCLUSIONS

The Traditional medicine is an ancient medical system that is being practised in the region for the time immemorial. Before the emergence of the modern healthcare system, the health and wellbeing of patients were fully managed by Traditional Medicine. However, due to advancement in research and materialisation of modern healthcare system, ancient medical system has become alternative medicine in region. Then, the constitution of kingdom of Bhutan has granted its citizen right for free medical service for both.

The physicians' sense of feeling, hearing and vision plays a vital role in diagnosing illnesses. However, with experience and growing wisdom the diagnosis can be efficient. Today the number of patients opting for traditional medicine is drastically increasing. The diagnosis in Traditional Medicine system has a protocol which guided through the times and now with emerging need, there is need of integrating few reliable modern technologies for betterment of system. Conventional method of diagnosis can preserve its uniqueness, but integration of reliable modern technologies can ease the diagnosis whereby strengthening the system.

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