

# Nying Lung Disorder, or Tibetan Medicine Perspective on Depression

Anastazja HOLEČKO

## Abstract

Traditional Tibetan medicine perceives so prevalent mental problems as an imbalance of the subtle Wind energy, or Lung in Tibetan. It is one of the three humors (*rlung*, *mkhris pa*, *bad kan*) that govern our health. When out of balance, Lung can cause such symptoms as emotional lability, anxiety, panic attacks, depression, or bipolar disorder, to mention just a few. Over millennia Tibetan medicine has compiled a system of effective methods to rebalance the three humors and bring back the state of health. To the healing methods belong therapeutic diet and lifestyle, herbal compounds, and a wide range of external therapies, such as Tibetan massage *kunye*, moxa, *horme*, or *yukcho*. On top of that spiritual healing, connected with Buddhist tradition, is applicable.

**Keywords:** *Tibetan medicine, depression, nying lung, horme, yukcho, nejang.*

**Lek. med. Anastazja HOLEČKO** is a medical doctor, graduated from the Medical University of Lodz, living and practicing in Prague, Czech Republic. She has completed the studies of traditional Tibetan medicine at the International Academy of Traditional Tibetan Medicine (IATTM), and did the internships in Dharamsala, India and Amdo, Tibet. She is the chef editor of the “Journal of Traditional Tibetan Medicine”.

**E-MAIL:** [nastimi@gmail.com](mailto:nastimi@gmail.com)

## 1 Introduction

One of the most common complaints of our busy modern times is, gently speaking, lack of mental calmness. It extends from relatively mild forms like attention deficit, restlessness, insomnia, emotional lability, lack of concentration, anxiety, burnout, to more serious mental disorders like panic attacks, bipolar disorder and depression.

Defined as “a common mental disorder that presents with depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, decreased energy, feelings of guilt or low self-esteem, disturbed sleep or appetite, and poor concentration”, it becomes a more and more frequent problem not only in the developed countries. According to the WHO, depression affects 350 million people worldwide, and it will be the leading cause of disease burden worldwide by 2030. If burnout, grief reactions and other stress related disorders were included in the diagnosis-criteria of depression, this could lead to a lifetime prevalence of about 80%.<sup>1</sup> People with depressed mood can feel sad, anxious, empty, hopeless, helpless, worthless, guilty, irritable or restless. Insomnia, excessive sleeping, fatigue, aches, pains, digestive problems or reduced energy may also be present.<sup>2</sup> While our Western physicians tend to concentrate on physical complaints, ignoring mental state of a patient, this immense mental suffering can even lead to suicide. The treatment of depression brings many side effects and is not in long term successful.

On the other hand, traditional Tibetan medicine can offer a cure for such problems. It is based on a natural healing system, as well as on Buddhist view. Although Tibetan medicine originated from the Bon tradition approximately four thousands year ago, over the time the Buddhist elements soaked in and became an inseparable part of this medical tradition. Already in the second century CE two Ayurvedic doctors moved to Tibet from India, to spread their knowledge in the Land of Snow. However, the biggest impact on development of Tibetan medicine had “transplantation” of Buddhist teachings to Tibet by Guru Rinpoche (*pad ma 'byung gnas*, 730–810 CE) in the 8th century CE. At these times, when Tibet was under a rule of a Tibetan king Trisong Detsen (*khri srong lde btsan*, 742–798 CE), there took place a significant historical event – the First Congress on Traditional Tibetan Medicine in Samye, where the most eminent doctors from all the neighboring countries came

<sup>1</sup>Jean-Pierre Lépine and Mike Briley, *The increasing burden of depression*, passim.

<sup>2</sup>*Depression*, [www 01], 2012.



to share their medical knowledge. It was then that outstanding doctor and a Buddhist practitioner called Yuthok Yonten Gonpo (*g.yu thog yon tan gon po*, 729–854 CE), became known as a founder of Tibetan medicine. He combined the knowledge from the ancient texts (like *Bum zhi* – first Tibetan text on medicine), his deep personal experience and wisdom, and teachings from the doctors from the other countries to create Gyu shi (*rgyud bzhi*), the Four Medical Tantras that became the basis for traditional Tibetan medicine.

Yuthok stressed that for achieving a stable health, both physical and mental, it is crucial to engage into spiritual development and work with mind. And so he wrote his second “jewel” – Yuthok nying tig (*g.yu thog snying tig*), the cycle of spiritual practices for Tibetan doctors and lay practitioners.<sup>3</sup>

Also the original name of Tibetan medicine – Sowa Rigpa (*gso ba rig pa*) reflects the importance of mental work. Sowa is usually translated as “healing” and rigpa as “science”, resulting in “healing science”. However, it can also be translated as sowa – “nourishment” and rigpa as “awareness”, giving “nourishment of awareness”. It seeks the real causes of all suffering, both physical and mental, and is coherent with the Buddhist view on that.

So what is the principal cause of all suffering? According to Tibetan medicine, it is the ignorance of our true nature and the nature of universe (Tib. *marigpa*). Due to this basic ignorance we perceive the world in a dualistic way, which gives rise to 84000 of disturbing emotions. They can be summarized to three main emotions, called also mind poisons: attachment, aversion and confusion. Those are closely connected with the energies in our body, so-called Three Humors (*nye pa gsum*): Wind (*rlung*), Bile (*mkhrispa*) and Phlegm (*badkan*). Imbalance of the Three Humors manifests later on as a disease on a physical level.<sup>4</sup>

HUMOR	CORRESPONDING EMOTION	CORRESPONDING ELEMENT
Lung ( <i>rlung</i> )	Attachment/desire	Wind
Tripa ( <i>mkhrispa</i> )	Hatred	Fire
Beken ( <i>badkan</i> )	Confusion	Water and Earth

Table 1: The Three Humors

<sup>3</sup>Dr Nida Chenagtsang, *The Path to Rainbow Body – introduction to Yuthok Nyingtig*, passim.

<sup>4</sup>Dr Nida Chenagtsang, *Sorig basics – Root tantra*, passim.



Chronic stress, extremely busy life style, lack of sleep, improper food, is something our nervous and hormonal systems are not handling well in longer term. It leads to chronic elevation of stress hormones like cortisol, and later on to adrenal burnout, which affects multiple functions of our body and mind.

From the Tibetan medicine point of view, it brings imbalance on the energy level, the three humors, and those affect both the mind and the body. The most often target of such an unbalanced lifestyle is Lung humor, responsible for the mental health.

The direct translation of Lung is Wind, and its nature is constant movement. Its functions are highly complex. Its subtle part (*phra rlung*) is inseparably connected with mind, constituting its movement aspect, à côté de awareness aspect. It can be compared to a horse on which the mind rides. Movement enables the constant flow of thoughts, emotions, and perception.

The gross aspect of Lung (*rags rlung*) manifests on energy level as five so-called karmic Winds. Each of them plays important role in the body functioning, from breathing, swallowing, excreting, to transmitting nervous signals to brain, and regulating heart beat. In the table 2 below the functions of each karmic Lung are listed in detail.

Depression in particular is caused by Lung disorder in the heart. Heart is one of the Lung locations in the body – the seat of All-pervading Lung. When it is in balance, it governs the heartbeat, controls sense organs, the skin pores, and all bodily movements. Abnormal function of Lung in the heart is called Nying Lung (*snying rlung*) and brings the symptoms of depression.

According to Tibetan medicine, the primary cause of Lung disorder is ignorance and excessive desire/attachment. However, there are also secondary causes, or conditions, that are necessary for a disorder to manifest. While primary causes can be compared to a seed sown in mind, secondary causes are like soil, water and sun that enable the seed to grow.

To secondary causes in Tibetan medicine belong: diet, lifestyle, seasons, and negative external influences. From these, diet and lifestyle are of special importance, because we decide on them every day. Thus we can choose whether to support our health, or bring further imbalance to our system.

In the table 3 below there are specified secondary causes increasing Lung imbalance.



<b>Life supporting wind (<i>Srog dzin rlung</i>)</b>	
LOCATION	FUNCTIONS
Head	Is the principal wind, from which derive the other four winds; connects the body with mind and energy; controls functions such as swallowing, breathing, salivation, sneezing and hiccups; provides clarity to the intellect and to the sensory perceptions and ensures the functioning of memory.
<b>Ascending wind (<i>Rgyen rgyu rlung</i>)</b>	
LOCATION	FUNCTIONS
Chest	Controls the speech; generates the physical and mental strength; clears the complexion; gives courage, ability to focus, willpower and makes the memory clear.
<b>All-pervading wind (<i>Khyab byed rlung</i>)</b>	
LOCATION	FUNCTIONS
Heart	Produces the heartbeat; responsible for the movement of the heart and body; opening and closing the doors of the senses and the skin pores.
<b>Wind that increases metabolic heat (<i>Me mnyam rlung</i>)</b>	
LOCATION	FUNCTIONS
Stomach; small intestine	Presides over digestion and assimilation of food; regeneration of body constituents.
<b>Descending wind (<i>Thur sel rlung</i>)</b>	
LOCATION	FUNCTIONS
Colon, rectum	Regulates the retention and elimination of reproductive fluids (sperm and egg), blood, feces and urine; Assists with delivery during childbirth.

Table 2: The five types of karmic Wind



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 DIET

Innutritious, processed, refined foods  
 Foods having bitter taste and light and coarse potency (e.g. raw food)  
 Eating irregularly  
 Fasting

## LIFESTYLE

Excessive mental activities, stress  
 Deprivation of food and sleep  
 Strenuous physical and verbal activities  
 Excessive sex  
 Deep mourning, crying  
 Retaining or forcing out the waste products (stool, urine)  
 Excessive bleeding, diarrhea and vomiting

## CLIMATE

Overexposure to cold and wind

## NEGATIVE INFLUENCES

Elemental spirits and wrathful spirits

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Table 3: Secondary causes that increase Lung

We keep planning the future, we dwell in the past, regretting what has happened, and rarely enjoying the present moment – the only one truly existing. Our mind becomes in a way “detached” from the body, from the powerful moment being “here and now”. Such busy, unstable mind is easily provoked by so-called immediate causes that trigger the Lung reaction. It can be grief and sorrow, e.g. lost of dear ones, bad news and unpleasant events, stress and overworking, overexerting of body, speech or mind.

Particularly susceptible to Nying Lung are people of Lung typology who have an inclination to Lung disorders from birth. Deprivation of love, friendship, or wealth, also contributes to Lung imbalance. Predisposing factors are also unhealthy heart and disturbances in the central channel.

## 2 Symptoms

The signs and symptoms of Lung in the heart that a Tibetan doctor looks for while taking the medical history, are as follows:

- sudden, uncontrolled movements of the body



- tremor
- intolerance to touch and noise
- unclear answers
- attention deficit
- heart discomfort
- fainting, dizziness
- restlessness, unsettling thoughts, talkativeness
- fear, panic attacks
- hallucinations
- insomnia
- difficult inhalation and sighing
- high or hoarse voice
- pain in the joints

On top of history taking a Tibetan doctor checks also patient's pulse, urine and sense organs. The indication of Lung excess would be empty, floating pulse, clear, bubbly urine and dry, red, rough tongue.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Lung treatment

What concerns treatment, the patient is always approached holistically in Tibetan medicine. When causes of imbalance are found, the treatment is aimed to remove the causes and re-install the balance on all the levels: physical, energy, and mental.

There are four main methods of treatment in TTM: diet, lifestyle, herbal medicines, and external therapies. They aim to find an antidote that would re-balance Lung. Lung's six characteristics are: subtle, light, cold, mobile, rough, dry. Therefore the substances, be it the food, drinks, or medicines, of same qualities will increase it, and those with the opposite qualities (heavy, oily, warm, stable, soft) will pacify it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Dr Sonam Dolma, *Nying Lung*.

<sup>6</sup>Yuthok Yonten Gonpo, *The Root Tantra and Explanatory Tantra from the Four Tantras of Tibetan Medicine*, passim.



CHARACTERISTICS AND MANIFESTATIONS		ANTIDOTE
Rough ( <i>Zub</i> )	Rough, dry skin; mental stress	Smooth
Light ( <i>Yang</i> )	Unstable, distracted mind, full of thoughts	Heavy
Cold ( <i>Drang</i> )	Cold feeling in the body, shivering; depression	Warm
Subtle ( <i>Tra</i> )	Migrating pain; recurrent thoughts, fixations	Gross
Hard ( <i>Sra</i> )	Muscle stiffness; stubbornness	Soft
Mobile ( <i>Yo</i> )	Easily changing ones mind; inability to stand firm	Stable

Table 4: Characterstics of Lung and its antidotes

In the table 5 below, there are specified the healing methods for Nying Lung.

DIET
Warm, oily, nutritious foods, like bone and meat broth, nettle, onion, garlic, tsampa, beef, sheep, horse meat, aged meat, aged butter, seed oils, milk, chang
LIFESTYLE
Enough sleep (8-9h); Warm, cosy, dark place, devoid of distraction; warm clothes; pleasing the senses, pleasant music and words, smells, colors, soft touch; company of beloved people; contact with nature
MEDICINES
Soups prepared from: nutmeg, red salt, asafetida, ginger, black salt, caraway, bones; alcohol infusions from: Asparagus, Polygonatum, Angelica, Tribulus terrestris, brown sugar, tsampa dough; powders and butters based on: nutmeg, asafetida, back salt, black pepper, long pepper, ginger, cinnamon, pomegranate, cardamom, Terminalia chebula, Tinospora cordifolia, garlic
EXTERNAL THERAPIES
Tibetan massage Kunye; horne (Mongolian moxa) and moxa on Lung points; compress with oils; mild enema with warm aged butter; steam bath using bone broth

Table 5: Healing methods for Lung imbalance

The above-mentioned methods are very effective, especially when used





all together. Improper diet and lifestyle has to be addressed to reach a better result and prevent recurrence of the disease. Tibetan massage Kunye (*bsku mnye*) has deeply relaxing and settling down effect, especially due to application of warm oil on all body surface. Horme and moxa applied on the therapeutical points connected with Lung help rebalance this humor.

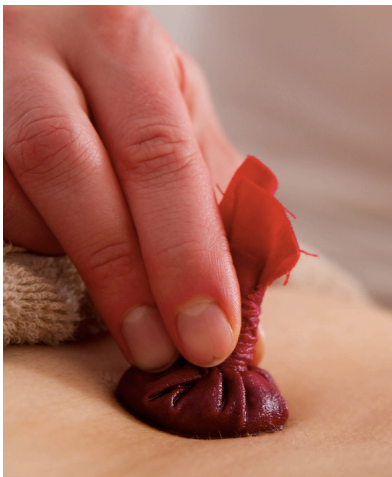


Figure 1: Warming up Lung related points with Horme



Figure 2: Heating the Lung points with moxa



There is a number of herbal formulas that can be applied. Many of them are based on eagle wood (*Agar*), like *Agar 8*, *Agar 15*, *Agar 20*.<sup>7</sup> Among other formulas there are *Srog 'dzin 11*, *Sems bde*, *Dza ti 5*, *Arnag 6*, or famous *Bimala* (*Dzati nyishu yang zer*), named after its founder, Vimalamitra (*dri med bshes gnyen*). This great master who lived in India in the 9th century CE prophesized that in future the Nying Lung disorder will be widely prevalent, people will be confused, emotionally unstable, thinking about thousands of things at the same time, and having problems concentrate on anything. He invented a formula that would calm down these symptoms.

If *Bimala*, or other herbal formulas for Nying Lung are not available, there is a simple recipe one can do at home. This is a tisane of the three substances: 100g of ginger, 100g of asafetida, 5g of salt (*halitum violaceum*). Mix all the ingredients and put a teaspoon of this compound in a glass of hot water, drink hot. It helps in case of insomnia, emotional ability, sadness, and depression. A pinch of nutmeg in warm milk before sleep can also help to balance Lung.

## 4 Spiritual healing

On top of the above-mentioned methods, in Tibetan medicine there is a fifth category of treatment, spiritual healing. Here belong various types of meditations, like mindfulness meditation, Empty Body meditation, Breathing meditations, Medicine Buddha meditation, Mantra Healing, and other. An interesting technique called *Yukcho* (*dbyug dchos*), coming from the terma tradition, is a stick massage that introduces a gentle vibration on the points of Lung, releasing its blockages (see figure 3).<sup>8</sup>

Another method to unblock the Lung, is Tibetan healing yoga *Nejang* (*gnas byang*). It is a medical part of *Tsa Lung Trul Khor* (*rtsa rlung sprul 'khor, yantra yoga*), coming from the Kalachakra Tantra tradition. It uses the breath combined with body movements and self massage to purify the energy locations in the body thus using the anchor of the physical body to bring the Lung energy down. When the energy becomes balanced, then the mind can become happy (see figure 4).

<sup>7</sup>Jamgon Kongtrul Yonten Gyatso, *Зинтиг – капли нектара: заметки для начинающих врачей*, passim.

<sup>8</sup>Philippe Gonin, *Yuk Cho – Traditional Tibetan Stick Therapy*, passim.





Figure 3: Yukcho – stick therapy

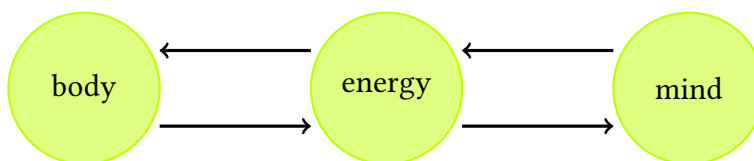


Figure 4: The interconnections between body, energy and mind

The patient must consciously participate in the healing process. Without taking responsibility for your own health the results are much less clear. In Tibetan medicine, the patient gets a great support on the physical and energy levels, which makes it easier to work with the primary causes of disease – mind ignorance. Eating warm, nutritious food, taking Tibetan herbs and applying Tibetan therapies helps mind relax and settle down, tame the wild horse of Lung. But in this busy world we have to consciously create time for rest and calm, learn how to relax, find time for friends and family.

Other advices that Tibetan doctors give to depressed patients are: breathe deeply and slowly, concentrate on the positive, find inner peace. Stop complaining, don't blame others for what happened to you, don't try to explain

everything to yourself, just let it be. Accept defeat, but don't cling to faults. Train mindfulness, be here and now. Train bodhisattva way of life, focusing on how to help others rather than on your own problems.

The ultimate aim of healing in Tibetan medicine is convergent with the aim of Buddhist spiritual practice – to realize that the nature of mind is timeless clear light, and all its contaminations, emotions, thoughts are only transient. By dissolving the ignorance about mind's nature one dissolves all the suffering, be it mental or physical. Combining the profound methods of Tibetan medicine with Buddhist meditation can thus bring lasting results in treatment of depression.



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