

Traditional Thai Medicine

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History shows that Thai people have been using herbal medicines for healthcare since before 1238 AD (Chokevivat 2005). The principle concern of Buddhism, the main religion of Thailand, is eliminating suffering, which coincides with the values of medicinal practice well (Hughes 1995). Thai traditional medicine is the compilation of Buddhists principles, cultural medicinal practices, and traditional philosophies (Chokevivat 2005).

Buddhism has a great influence upon Thai traditional medicine and many principles are used for medical analysis. Written in texts formerly used by royal physicians at Thai court, illnesses are categorized through *krasais*, which describe symptoms of the body (Bamber 1987). Number symbolism is another contribution from Buddhism. There are 108 different *krasais* such as “wind”, “fire” and “blood”. The number 108 comes from Buddhist origins. Bamber (1987) suggests that the number 108 is more like a metaphor to suggest that there are many different *krasais*. In the royal texts, there are 26 *krasais* described broken into categories containing 8 and 18 *krasais*. The number 8 appears frequently in Buddhism, for example in the Noble eight-fold path and in Ayurvedic medicine there are 8 divisions of illness that was also adopted by Buddhism (Bamber 1987).

THE FOUR BODY ELEMENTS

Traditional Thai medical theory is referred to as the “1000-years ancient wit” (Salguero 2003). The basis of Thai traditional medical theory states that the human body is composed of 4 basic elements. Each element refers not to the physical substance but to the qualities of that substance (Somchintana 1986). These elements are *tards* of the body, which consist of “earth”, “wind”, “fire”, and “water” (Chokevivat 2005). In order to stay healthy, the four elements must be in perfect balance and harmony. If these elements are out of balance, the body’s ability to repair itself will be weakened and a person will become vulnerable to illness and sadness (Somchintana 1986). Many factors can offset this balance listed here: poor diet, poor lifestyle choices, inappropriate state of mind, changes in weather, pollution, and poor living and working environments and they must be either removed or alleviated so that healing can take place naturally (Salguero 2003). Each person has a personal element that is usually determined by the month of birth, however, this may change due to the way a person is raised (Somchintana 1986). This personal element will normally determine the health of a person throughout their life (Somchintana 1986).

Also affecting a person’s health, according to Thai traditional medicine, are the seasons, age, geography, time and behavior (Chokevivat 2005). Illness can be caused by supernatural powers (ancestor souls, evil spirits, punishment from spirits for misbehavior), powers of nature (imbalance of *tards*, imbalance of hot and cold, imbalance of body equilibrium), powers of the universe (influence of sun, moon and stars) and *Kimijati*, which is the equivalent of microorganisms or parasites (Chokevivat 2005).

The ancient Thai also believed that the elements exist in the time of day. During twenty-four hours, Thai’s theorize we travel through two elemental cycles, each consisting of water, fire, and wind (Salguero 2003). They believe that the closer we follow these cycles, the healthier and happier we will feel (Salguero 2003).

EARTH ELEMENT

The earth element is most commonly dominant of people born in winter during the months of November, December, or January. A person ruled by the earth element will have big strong bones and joints. They’ll be muscular and powerful, and normally have a darker complexion. Earth element people will have perfect skin health, bone and muscular health. The earth element affects “solid” organs, such as skin, muscle, tendon, bone, and other more solid organs. Thus, earth sicknesses are considered to be tumors, hemorrhoids, skin disease, bone disease, and joint disease (Somchintana 1986).

WATER ELEMENT

The water element generally rules over people born in fall during the months of August, September, and October. These people will normally have a good figure, healthy complexion and will be able to tolerate extreme temperature well. The water element controls the “liquid” parts of the body. A person ruled by the water element will have great blood and eyes. Water illnesses include blood diseases, eye diseases, urination problems and infections (Somchintana 1986).

Water time is considered the time from six to ten in the morning and evening. Water time would be the best time to relieve water element illnesses. A person could relieve these illnesses by consuming food and drinks with a sour or bitter taste during this time (Salguero 2003).

WIND ELEMENT

A person born during the summer in the months of May, June, or July is ruled by the wind element. Wind element type people are normally tall and thin with loose joints and rough skin. They may have trouble sleeping, become bored easily and be rather timid. The wind element controls those functions of the body that are “moving.” This involves the respiratory system and the digestive system. Thus, wind element people will have strong intestinal and respiratory health. Respiratory illnesses, intestinal illnesses, constipation, and other inner illnesses are considered wind illnesses (Somchintana 1986).

Wind time is considered to be the time from two to six in the morning and afternoon. During this time, a person should consume food and drinks that are hot or spicy to relieve wind element diseases (Salguero 2003).

FIRE ELEMENT

The fire element people are born in spring during the months of February, March, and April. People ruled by the fire element are normally thin yet always hungry. They are impatient and intolerant to heat. The fire element controls parts of the body that are related to “heat.” This includes circulation, temperature control, and metabolism. Fire element people have strong circulatory systems and high metabolisms. Fire element illnesses include heart disease and fever (Somchintana 1986).

Fire time is the time from ten until two in the middle of the day and the middle of the night. During this time, if suffering from a fire element disease, a person should consume food or beverages with a cool taste (Salguero 2003).

HEALTH AND TREATMENT

Traditional Thai medicine seeks to restore health by overcoming imbalances in the system. A traditional Thai medicine practitioner will be well trained of the four elements and will be excellent at treating imbalances. Thais believe that by overcoming these imbalances, health and harmony will be restored to the body. Throughout life, the body will go through phases of balance and imbalance. Children and the elderly are more susceptible to diseases because they are less likely to be in balance (Salguero 2003). In children, the four elements have not yet fully matured. In the elderly, the elements have become weakened. Slowly, the elements will become more and more weak until eventually they are exhausted and the individual will die (Salguero 2003). The four elements are regarded as the foundation of the whole body and the foundation of life.

When an examination is performed, Thai traditional medicine practitioners require the patient’s date, time, month and year of birth to determine their dominant *tard*, or element, in order to gain equilibrium again (Chokevivat 2005). Then a physical examination is performed and a diagnosis is made to treat a patient with some practitioners also performing an astrological examination as well (Chokevivat 2005).

THE INFLUENCE OF WESTERN MEDICINE

With the increasing popularity of western medicine in the 1980s came an increasing disbelief of traditional Thai medicine. As doubts of the traditional healing arts became more widespread, the practice of the alternative therapy that traditional Thai medicine offered were outlawed as unscientific and dangerous (Disayavanish 1998). While the practices were still passed down during these years, many of the traditional healers did not openly practice due to a fear of being arrested. This included healing offered by Buddhist monks in temples and villages throughout Thailand, a practice that many Thai saw as an important part of the Buddhist beliefs (WHO 2001).

As western medicine became more popular, it was seen as an important and useful tool in treating many diseases. However, as years passed, the people of Thailand began to question certain aspects of western medicine. They were unsatisfied with western medicine’s focus on disease and lack of emphasis on wellness, an important aspect of traditional Thai medicine. Additionally, while Thai medicine offered relief from the pain of chronic diseases and disabilities through massage and herbal treatments, the western medicinal treatment of chronic disease often came with side effects and rarely offered a cure as it did with short-term disease (Disayavanish 1998). Western medicine slowly lost its magical appeal and a movement to reevaluate traditional Thai medicine began.

In the late 1990s, the movement to legalize traditional Thai medicine was finally heard by the government and in 1999, The Protection and Promotion of Traditional Thai Medicine Wisdom Act B.E. 2542 was passed. This act protected the practice of traditional Thai medicine as well as began an official record of the practices so that the knowledge is preserved (Bhumibhol 1999). Additionally, this movement influenced the image and understanding of traditional Thai medicine. To have a more substantial understanding of traditional medicine's benefits, scientific studies have been conducted on the specific effects of traditional healing practices, especially massage and herbal remedies (WHO 2001). As an ultimate result, current traditional Thai medicine is infused with minor aspects of western medicine. This infusion and the promotion of traditional medicine by the Thai government make traditional practices very unique as well as widespread in Thailand and the practices continue to grow in popularity. With organizations such as the Foundation for Restoring Thai Traditional Medicine and the College of Ayurvedic Medicine, traditional Thai medicine is rapidly being reintroduced to many areas of Thailand and has a promising future (Disayavanish 1998).

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