

Sowa Rigpa: An Avenue for Personal Health and Well-being.

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Abstract

Wellbeing has been defined as a positive approach to living – an approach that emphasizes the whole person. Lifestyle has been found to be the most important factor determining our pattern of health. The wellness-oriented lifestyle as recommended by *sowa rigpa* encourages us to adopt habits and behaviors that promote better health, improved quality of life and longevity. *Sowa rigpa* explains that medicine for health and wellbeing is not only found in pills but also in the food we eat, the lifestyle we consider and the practices of mindfulness. This paper attempts to present a brief discussion on the concept of our body's natural health, the root cause of diseases, our bodies' energy types and suitable dietary habits; and some mindfulness practices, all of which are based on the knowledge and principles of *sowa rigpa*. In a world where self-healing and naturopathy is gaining popularity, the teaching of *sowa rigpa* provides a truly holistic and unique healing system that very much embodies this approach of health and well-being.

Introduction

Wellness has traditionally been viewed as freedom from disease; thus, if you were not sick, you were considered healthy. This perspective is changing. While everyone agrees that the absence of illness is one part of being healthy, it doesn't indicate whether you are in a state of well-being. Orem (1985) has emphasized well-being as a term used to describe an individual's perception of their conditions. Well-being refers to the integration of a person's physical, mental, emotional, spiritual and social characteristics. Hartweg (1990) and Orem (1985) have emphasized that wellbeing is an internal construct which may be independent of external conditions. For instance, it is possible to be ill or not healthy but still enjoy a sense of well-being. For the purpose of this review, wellbeing has been defined as a positive approach to living – an approach that emphasizes the whole person. It is the integration of the body, mind, and spirit; and the appreciation that everything you do, think, feel, and believe has an impact on your state of health.

Since lifestyle has been found to be the most important factor determining your pattern of general health and well-being, it is important to expose ourselves to the desired ways of taking personal responsibility of our daily life and setting healthy lifestyle goals. The choices we make can have a dominant influence on our health and wellbeing. The wellness-oriented lifestyle encourages us to adopt habits and behaviors that promote better health and an improved quality of life. It also involves the recognition that you have physical, psychological, social, and spiritual needs, with each dimension being necessary for optimal levels of functioning.

What is even more fascinating is that well-being is associated with longevity. One study analyzed the autographical reports for expression of happiness, of young nuns entering an American school in 1932. Those reports were later rated by psychologists to show the amount of positive feelings revealed by them. The results indicated that the amount of positive feelings expressed in those autographical reports in their twenties predicted their life span. Many years later, of the nuns who were still alive in 1991, only 21% of the most cheerful

ones died in the following nine years, compared with 55% of the least cheerful quarter of nuns. This indicates that happiness and well-being can increase a person's length of life (Layard, 2005).

Therefore, this paper attempts to provide a brief description of how one can achieve health and well-being through adoption of the knowledge and principles of *sowa rigpa*, the official system of traditional medicine practiced in Bhutan. *Sowa rigpa* seeks to unify the body's struggle with illness and the spirit's quest for liberation. Thus the definition of health encompasses much more than physical well-being; a quest for wholeness in mind and body; a challenge to our Western notion that our bodies are capable of being healed without engaging our minds in the process. *Sowa rigpa* explains that medicines for health and wellbeing is not only found in the pills and powders that is carefully prepared from various components but also in the food we eat, the behaviors we adopt, and the practices of mindfulness and attention in which we engage, guided by right motivation (Craig, 2008).

The fundamental textbook *Gyudzhi* of *sowa rigpa* is believed to be taught by the Buddha; therefore it is closely linked with Buddhist philosophy. The followers believe that whether we are physically well or not, all of us are sick until we attain nirvana (Gurmet, 2004). This implies that unless we overcome the root cause of all sickness (i.e. ignorance), the hope of achieving health and wellbeing remains a distant dream. Nevertheless, the teaching of *sowa rigpa* has much to offer us today through its vast wisdom and philosophy for the faithful souls who wish to enjoy the fruit of good health and wellbeing. The purpose of this paper is to discuss a critical review of our body's natural health, the root cause of diseases, energy types, dietary habits and some mindfulness practices, based on the concept of *sowa rigpa*; which are hoped to be both practical and useful for providing 'self help' in maintaining homeostasis – a state of complete physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health.

The Body in its Natural condition of Health

The teaching of *sowa rigpa* explains that along with and beyond the visible man there is a vast area of invisible forces, currents and vibratory structures, inaccessible to the senses, but nevertheless entirely real and concrete. These invisible forces are essential for the proper functioning of the body and mind, and constitute the subtle counterpart of the gross physical body. They may be described as the three *nyepa* energies: *Lung*, *Thripa* and *Bedkan*; or the three humours: Wind, Bile and Phlegm respectively. These energies pervade the subtle body, symbolized by a bird, snake and a pig. It is the combination of these subtle energies that dictates the individual's constitutional type and disposition. An imbalance in the three *nyepa* energies is the very nature of ill health, giving rise to various diseases (Forde, 2008). Therefore, in order to maintain homeostasis the dynamic force of the three humours should be in equilibrium and harmony with each other together with the seven basic body constituents (Essential nutriment, Blood, Fat, Flesh, Bone, Bone marrow and Regenerative fluid); and the three excrements (Faeces, Urine and Perspiration).

The basic cause of all diseases

Buddhism is at the heart of *sowa rigpa*. The Buddhist belief and teaching concerning the basic cause of all disease starts at the primordial level with the concept of *marigpa* or ignorance, which is the belief in self. It is this very nature of *marigpa* that causes each and every being at one stage or another to suffer. Buddhist teaching states that as soon as there is belief in this self, there is 'other' and so comes about 'duality', which is experienced as

subjectivity, a feeling of separateness and a lack of compassion. This delusional way of relating to oneself causes the world to throw the three *nyepa* energies out of balance, which brings about ill health (Forde, 2008).

Our sense of ‘self’ as a single entity is incorrect, taught the Buddha. Self is not solid; we are composed of different components, rather than being solid individuals. When we believe in a truly existing I, we become selfish and try to hold on this presumed ‘self’ (Rinpoche, 2012). It is the belief in the existence of self that gives rise to numerous afflictive emotions, which in turn gives rise to the three mental poisons – *dod-chag* (attachment), *zhe-dang* (hatred) and *ti-mug* (closed-mindedness). The three mental poisons thus trigger the affliction of the *nyepa* energies because attachment affects *lung*, anger affects *thripa* and ignorance affects *bedkan* respectively, which manifest as ailments or illnesses.

The Buddhist concept of the root of all disease arising from *marigpa*, as mentioned above, is known as ‘distant cause’ or is sometimes called ‘the universal long-long term cause of the disease’. However, the etiology of disease is not found only on the primordial level as a result of *marigpa*.

Diseases may also arise as a result of various elements and influences that operate in our daily lives, such as improper diet and negative lifestyles, which can upset the homeostatic equilibrium. These are known as ‘immediate causes’. These ‘immediate causes’ may produce symptoms or disorders directly after having taken wrong food, contact with unfavorable climate, negative emotions and wrong behaviors (Arya, 2009). *Sowa rigpa* teaches that if one does not follow the law of nature and its changes, consumes wrong diet and engages in wrong behavior, the humors will accumulate and disturb the body balance and aggravate themselves in the state of sickness. Hence before treating patients, a *Drungtsho* (*sowa rigpa* practitioner) first seeks to determine which of the three *nyepas* predominates in the patient’s make –up, then treats the patients according to their individual energetic constitution.

Identifying your constitutional type

Sowa rigpa explains that an individual’s metabolism is based both on genetic inheritance and on his or her combination of the three *nyepa* energies. The latter is partly determined before conception by previous karma and partly at conception, depending on the *nyepa* type of the parents. For example, if both parents are *thripa* type, then the likelihood is that the baby will be *thripa* too. Accordingly, there are a total of seven constitutional types, which may be based around single *nyepa* energy or be a combination of energies. The best constitution is said to be one that is combined, because then the body and mind are in balance (Forde, 2008).

To determine your constitutional type, a *Drungtsho* may do a pulse diagnosis, urine analysis; take astrological information and a detailed medical history. However, simple observation of your physical structure and personality will enable you to identify which energy predominates in your body, so that you can make some simple dietary and lifestyle changes for an independent empowered personal well-being.

Lung type: You are probably thin, with a cold constitution, as well as highly active mentally, talkative and quarrelsome. You tend to suffer from stress and anxiety, insomnia and depression. When your bodily energies are out of balance, your digestion is the first area to be affected, and sleep problems are also likely to ensue.

Thripa type: You are likely to be rounded in body shape and often feel hungry and thirsty, having a healthy appetite. You sweat easily and may have a strong body odor. You are quick on the uptake and convincing in arguments. Jealousy and anger may be close to the surface. Your physical weak points are your liver, gallbladder and small intestine. In general you may suffer from hot diseases, which manifest on the skin in particular.

Bedkan type: You probably have a strong build (and may be overweight), a cool body and a thick skin. You can endure hunger and thirst and you love your sleep. Your digestion tends to be sluggish, which makes you susceptible to mucus diseases. You may be shy. Of the three *nyepa* types, you tend to hold onto your wealth the most effectively.

Lung and thripa combined type: Wind and bile mixed constitution bears the combined characteristics and natures. Especially the person bears fear and anxiety. When the wind is combined with the cold-bile nature, feet hands and nose are generally cold and women suffer from premenstrual pain. When the combination is with the hot bile, the heat goes to the head, face, neck and hair.

Thripa and Bedkan combined type: The bile and phlegm constitution also bears combined characteristics of the two humors. These people especially suffer from conflict of mind. The body is divided into two parts: the upper part of the body shows heat whilst the lower feels cold.

Lung and Bedkan combined type: The wind and phlegm constitution bears combined characteristics of the two humors and people especially suffer from confusion in the mind. They produce cold sweat and has a tendency for obesity.

Total combined type: The total combined constitution is considered to be the most well balanced body and state of mind.

Eating according to your *nyepa* type

After having diagnosed your *nyepa* type as primarily *lung*, *thripa* and *bedkan*, following a diet that best suits it is a means to ensure a balanced mix of the three life forces within the body, resulting in optimum health. The following passage provides some recommendations on the type of diet that may be followed based on their constitutional type.

Lung types

Lung types should eat a diet that is high in protein and take three regular meals a day. Breakfast is important because it grounds those with excessive *lung* energy. A protein drink should set you up for the day. Don't leave your main meal until late in the day, or you may feel sluggish and then be unable to sleep. Sweet, sour and salty foods (such as custard with honey, chutney and ham) are best for *lung* types as they increase internal body warmth.

When lung is out of balance or in excess, include nutmeg in the diet as much as possible, and eat oily and moistening foods, such as thick, frothy soups containing sesame or olive oil or meat casseroles cooked with butter. Foods that lung types eat should be cooked or warmed first. Stewed fruits such as rhubarb and apple with cinnamon are good, while raw fruit, cold desserts, ice creams, caffeine drinks, convenience foods, potatoes and a diet containing lots of salad are best avoided.

Thripa types

The word *thripa* means ‘heat’ and relates to body temperature and metabolism. *Thripa* types should eat foods that are sweet, astringent and bitter. Astringent foods like garlic cause the channels to contract, helping the energies to remain in their location in the body, while bitter foods like lemon and various herbs stimulate the stomach to produce digestive juices. Vegetables should be eaten raw as often as possible, as well as cold tofu, salads and sprouted grains, which are very rich in nutrients. Fresh raw juices are excellent for the *thripa* type, while foods that cause internal heat, such as lamb, curries with hot spices like chilies may be best avoided as they may aggravate a *thripa* constitution.

Bedkan types

Bedkan relates to body fluids and lubrication. *Bedkan* types feel cold, so they need heating foods. They should eat warm foods that are easy to digest, with lunch being the most important meal.

Breakfast could include pancakes with honey and a hot drink of fresh ginger or tea, and a protein milkshake or some yogurt may suffice for lunch. Astringent garlic helps the channels to contract, beneficial for *bedkan* types as for *thripa* types. Rich curries are good for *bedkan* types, keeping them warm; chilies can also be added to food. For an evening meal, something like rice with peas or lentils, or a lamb curry, will satisfy the appetite.

Meditation

Psychological health of a person is the cornerstone of *sowa rigpa* and the main form of practice that ensures this inner health is meditation. In Buddhism, the practice of meditation begins with understanding the thought process and gradually becomes more sophisticated. The common form of meditation used to cope with stress is a simple procedure that can be practiced by anyone. It involves focusing the mind on physiological processes such as breathing and walking. After obtaining a certain amount of skill with this basic type of meditation, the person shifts to more difficult objects of focus, such as his thought process and emotions (Dummer, 1994).

In Buddhism meditation is not practiced just for health, but as a way to attain enlightenment. Since all suffering comes from the mind, ultimate freedom comes from the study of mind. Meditation aims to reduce mental activity and begin the process of deconstruction of egocentricity or self-centeredness. The goal of meditation is to make you aware of your inner space and its vastness. When the mind starts to look inward, rather than reacting to everything outside, it is said to be the beginning of *nirvana*. When you start meditation, do small sessions of five to ten or 15 minutes. Build up a habit of practicing through short daily sessions, moving on to more extended periods. An excellent time to practice meditation is in the morning, when you wake up. The following are the seven physical postures (*Namnang Choeduen*) that all the enlightened masters have used (Forde, 2008):

1. Sitting with the legs in the vajra position:

This is the crossed-leg posture. Placing the leg in this position encourages the internal energies of the body to become balanced and helps you to remain alert. Moreover, both the practice of meditation and the cross-legged posture that is commonly depicted of Buddha's are intensely sacred.



2. Placing the hand in the meditation mudra:

For the purpose of meditation, the *dhyana mudra* is usually used. In this *mudra*, the left hand is placed palm up, and the right hand is placed palm up on top, with the thumbs just touching.

3. Keeping the spine straight:

The spine must be kept straight as a stack of golden coins; there must be no slouching. This is important because by keeping our back straight, we straighten out the subtle channels within our body through which our subtle winds or energies flow. This allows our mind to relax naturally, and become calm.

4. Keeping the eyes open:

The eyes must be open. As you start meditation, you can close them for a little to calm down the mind. The Buddha turned the wheel of the Dharma three times; The first time he said there was mind: The second time he said there was no mind; and the third time he said the mind was luminous. Start your practice with your gaze downwards at 45 degree to calm the mind. If you get sleepy, raise your gaze upward for a little while, then go back to gazing at 45 degree.

5. Putting the tongue against the palate:

The tip of the tongue placed against the palate is believed to connect all the internal energies in a way that enables the subtle life energies to flow. You will not have to swallow as much, for the saliva will simply flow down your throat and not interrupt your meditation. Experienced practitioners can meditate for periods of up to three hours and beyond.

6. Keeping the shoulders straight and the chin tucked in:

By keeping the shoulders straight and relaxed you will be less tensed .This also forces the chest out, giving you a sense of divine pride and open-heartedness that is characteristic of bodhisattva warrior. When the chin is out, the mind is oriented to the future and its numerous possibilities.

7. Keeping the mind relaxed:

When the mind is relaxed, its true nature begins to dawn. At first your awareness will detach itself from your thinking and start witnessing your state of thinking. Traditionally your

meditation journey is described in the following stages: a waterfall, rapids, fast-moving water, calm water and finally merging with the ocean.

Compassion and *Bodhicitta*

Enlightened love, as *Bodhicitta* or Compassion is at the heart of Buddhism. *Bodhicitta* is described as a wish fulfilling magic jewel since all happiness comes from the realization of this expression and, without *bodhicitta*, tantric practices are ineffective. Being of benefit to and loving others is the very epicenter of enlightenment. A tantric practitioner always begins with the pledge to practice in order to liberate all sentient beings, dedicating their healing work to the enlightenment of all whom their healing touches. It is said that if two doctors give medicine, one with *bodhicitta* mind and the other without it, the medicine given by the former will be more effective to cure, even if its quality is not as good as the later's medicine.

Bodhicitta is essential in the practice of *sowa rigpa* and is often the quality associated with the physicians who treat them. Transforming our minds, especially through the development of compassion and opening up to the truths of impermanence, interdependence, and the suffering of others, can eliminate the ultimate cause of all disease and heal our bodies, our lives, and the world around us (Rinpoche, 2001).

Conclusion

In view of the fact that *Sowa rigpa* is closely interwoven with Buddhism, learning about it can enrich their knowledge not only on the system of medicine but also on the Buddhist way of thinking. However, it is not necessary to be a Buddhist alone to gain immense benefit out of its vast knowledge and wisdom. Today, we live in a world where more and more people are realizing the importance of self-healing and the power of our body's healing potential, through the practice of naturopathy. As a result, emergence of a paradigm shift has been observed in their way of living and dietary habits, which are geared towards optimizing their health and wellbeing. To this end, the teaching of *sowa rigpa* provides a truly holistic and unique naturopathy that represents a great enrichment to this approach of self-healing.

The secret of health and wellbeing in *sowa rigpa* lies on the extent to which we can understand the functioning of our body and mind. Knowing the body constitution and carefully adjusting the lifestyle and eating habits accordingly can help to maintain a balanced physical body; while overpowering the negative emotions like attachment, hatred and close-mindedness can destroy ignorance, which is the root of all diseases. Mind and body are inseparable and interdependent, and thus as long as our mind is balanced, physical body remains healthy; which is the true manifestation of health, well-being and happiness.

As the Buddha said:

“Mind is the main and forerunner of all.
All things are mind made.
With a pure mind, if one speaks or acts
He will enjoy happiness, as a shadow never leaves” (Gatshel Publishing, 2012).

“May all sentient beings be aware of the healing energy within them as a natural source of strength that is freely available at any time” (Dunkenberger, 2000).

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