

3. HEALING CUSTOMS

The following are only the principal forms of health practices as there are over 21 practices in Southeast Asia that have been identified in a review of literature and interviews with interpreters and a medical anthropologist (1).

- (1) D. Buchwald, S. Panwala & T.M. Hooton, Use of Traditional Health Practices by Southeast Asian Refugees in a Primary Care Clinic, *The Western Journal of Medicine*, No 156, May 1992, pp 507-511.



3.1 Xông (steam bath)

Xông is the Vietnamese style of steam bath where a potful of water is boiled and herbs and drops of hot medicinal oil are added, the person sits under a blanket by the pot with their clothes off and allows the steam to emanate to the upper body, especially the head and face. The person should stay under the blanket until the steam no longer reaches the face. The person is advised to keep a towel ready as excessive perspiration is the desired result of steaming.

An effective steam bath promotes good health as it stimulates blood circulation and helps eliminate toxins from the body through the pores of the skin. Such baths are

recommended for sufferers of flu, headaches and nasal congestion.

3.2 Chườm (hot water bottle)

This form of heat treatment is used to relax the muscles in a specific part of the body and ease many forms of pain including menstrual spasms. This method of thermogenesis also aids circulation of the blood within the body, and for this reason it is excellent when placed under the sole of the feet of the arthritic sufferer (1).

As an alternative to hot water bottles, cloth bags filled with hot salt are also often used.

- (1) Chee Soo, *The Taoist Ways of Healing*, The Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1986, p. 69.

3.3 Cạo Gió (skin rubbing) & Bắ́t Gió (skin pinching)

Cạo Gió is the folk medicine technique of rubbing the skin vigorously with a coin or a spoon. The most commonly rubbed sites are the back, chest and neck. Often wintergreen or other oils are applied prior to the rubbing. The treatment may raise weals resembling bruising. *Cạo Gió* is used in the treatment of a variety of symptoms including colds, headaches, cough, fever and myalgias. *Bắ́t Gió* is used for the same purposes and involves pinching the skin between the thumb and the index finger to the point of producing an abrasion.

Both *Cạo Gió* and *Bắ́t Gió* are particularly popular in South Vietnam. It is the belief that people often get sick because the “wicked” wind and weather have penetrated the body and rubbing or pinching will release

them. It is also a more convenient method of treatment than approaching a doctor. The belief and procedure are aligned to the popular way Vietnamese people conceptualise the cause of their diseases and the method of treating them. Tran Minh Tung (1) sees in this popular healing practice a distinctive theory of “body humours”; the protagonist of these humours being *gió* or *phong* (meaning wind) and hence the *phong* theory. *Gió* or *phong* serves to indicate either the causal factor or an extremely acute disease or a pathological condition characterised by a skin eruption.

- (1) Tran Minh Tung, *The Indochinese Refugees as Patients*, *Journal of Refugee Resettlement*, 1, 1, 1981, pp 53-60.



3.4 Giác (cupping)

Giác involves applying a hot cup to an exposed area of the body. This simple method of creating suction is a method used to heal arthritis, abdominal pains, paralysis caused by stroke, abscesses and other illnesses caused through being out in the cold weather and catching internal chills (1).

The practitioner soaks in alcohol a cotton wool ball, lights it and puts it inside a glass using tweezers. Once a particular degree of heat is reached the ball is removed and the cup is placed on the patients' body for ten to fifteen minutes. The skin may have a red mark when the cup is removed and the practitioner will smear the area with oil or ointment to alleviate discomfort.

- (1) Chee Soo, *The Taoist Ways of Healing*, The Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1986, p. 63.

3.5 LỄ (blood drawing)

Blood drawing may be used together with cupping. It is used in extreme cases of strokes, high blood pressure, stings and snake bites (1). First the skin is punctured and a small amount of blood is discharged. The area is then immediately cupped and a considerable amount of blood flows into the cup.

Similarly, blood letting, which involves pricking of the skin with a triangular needle or magnetic disk, only allows a sufficient amount of blood to flow out. It is executed at specific points on the body to combat certain complaints, such as sunstroke or heatstroke, colic, diarrhoea, vomiting, shock and some injuries. Cupping is not used in this practice as the aim is to only release a small amount of blood (2).

- (1) Chee Soo, *The Taoist Ways of Healing*, The Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1986, p. 64.
- (2) Chee Soo, *ibid*, p. 64

3.6 ĐÁM BÓP (remedial massage)

Đám Bóp is well appreciated by the middle-aged and office workers. It is not known, however, when this dynamic form of therapeutics established itself in the healthy arts of Vietnam. It consists of two groups of techniques: stimulation techniques (grasping, kneading, pinch-pull, rubbing and tapping) and sedation techniques (pressing, rotating, rolling, wiping and scraping and pushing) (1). As these techniques are manual ones, a person wishing to practise massage should often exercise his/her fingers, hands, wrists and arms to ensure that these bodily parts are supple and flexible.

Simple as it first appears, this method of treatment is effective in taking away pain or stiffness from the muscles and joints, facilitating the circulation of blood, relieving cramps and spasms and chronic back troubles, breaking down the harmful effects of fatty tissue and strengthening muscular sinews.

- (1) Chee Soo, *The Taoist Ways of Healing*, The Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1986, p. 73.

3.7 THUỐC NAM & THUỐC BẮC (herbal therapy)

Herbal therapy has long been a part of Vietnamese medical history, as it has also been with every other country in the world. Vietnam, however, through its historical links with the big northern empire, has been able to use both resources, Vietnamese and Chinese medicinal herbs. According to Tran Minh Tung (1) *thuốc nam*,

literally, southern medicine, is true folk medicine, properly indigenous, in contrast to *thuốc bắc*, literally, northern medicine, which is more scholarly and esoteric and derived from a Chinese model.

In South Vietnam after 1975 the policy of using indigenous drugs and traditionally trained doctors has been promoted to compensate for the shortage of Western medicine. In Australia many Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese from Vietnam still prefer traditional treatments and herbal drugs to chemicals and surgical operations.

As far as the medicinal power of herbs and spices is concerned, hundreds of indigenous prescriptions for many types of disease have been reported in curing not only common ailments and chronic diseases, but also such diseases as jaundice, hepatitis and gastritis.

A great variety of indigenous herbs have been brought into use for the treatment of fractures and wounds, tumours and other forms of sickness.

- (1) Tran Minh Tung, The Indochinese Refugees as Patients, *Journal of Refugee Resettlement*, 1, 1, 1981, pp 53-60.

3.8 Châm Cứu (acupuncture)

Acupuncture procedure involves the rapid insertion of fine steel needles at specific points of the body along an energy channel, or meridian, as it is commonly known, followed by gentle twirling between the thumb and forefinger. This will either stimulate or sedate the energy force that flows along that particular channel, which in turn has its links with a specific organ. Redirecting the energy flow along meridians helps restore balance and correct the disorder.

Traditionally acupuncture has been used to treat malaria, stomach upsets and rheumatic or arthritic disease, to restore hearing for deaf-mutes and to induce sleep. Modern surgeons also use it as a form of anaesthesia.

3.9 Ăn Chay (vegetarian diet)

An chay as a Buddhist religious observance suggests a holistic and austere approach. Practitioners abstain from eating living things like fish and meat, using hot stuff like chilli and pepper, smoking and drinking, swearing and lying and engaging in immoral sexual activities. Many practising Buddhists go on vegetarian diet on the first, fourteenth, fifteenth and thirtieth days of the lunar calendar month and some do so everyday of the month. The practitioners are after the ideal of self-discipline and self-discipline will help them to

eliminate craving and dissatisfaction.

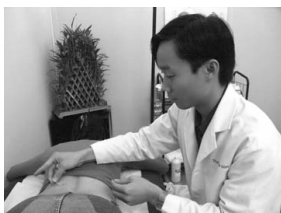
3.10 Ngồi Thiền (sitting in meditation)

Ăn chay also serves as a natural health therapy. The basic rules of health diets are:

- eat only when hungry and not just out of habit;
- eat only natural foods and avoid refined or processed foods;
- do not just gobble food or wash it down with liquid, but chew every mouthful of food really well in order to get the full benefit of saliva;
- do not overeat at any time because overeating is a crime against your system.

(1)

- (1) Chee Soo, *The Taoist Ways of Healing*, The Aquarian Press, Wellingborough, Northamptonshire, 1986, p. 41

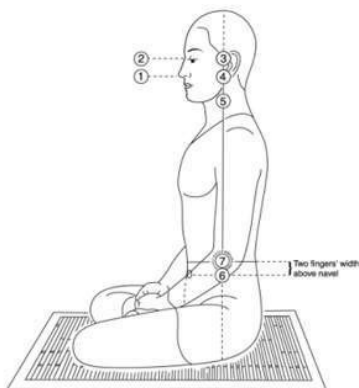


Meditation is a central discipline in Buddhism, but practitioners of meditation are not necessarily Buddhists. There are three major practices in meditation: one can focus on a riddle or *koan*, or simply sit with concentrated awareness and no external focus, or else practise *nembutsu*, which involves the continual invocation of Amida (1). Meditation, practised either way, is an important discipline for developing inner peace and calm, mental concentration and emotional balance.

Many Vietnamese prefer to combine the second and third methods, i.e. mental concentration coupled with constant mental chanting of a devotional formula such as *Nam Mô A Di Đà Phật* (Vietnamese for 'homage to Amida Buddha').

A Vietnamese modern school of meditation, the *Vô Vi* meditation method (2), which is fairly popular in some Vietnamese communities overseas, claims that by regular practice of *Vo Vi* improvement in physical and mental health may be noted within a relatively short period of time and, with an even longer period of regular practice, the effect of the meditative contemplation exercise will introduce the *Vo Vi* meditator into the world of energy.

- (1) Robert Frager & James Fadiman, *Personality and Personal Growth*, Harper & Row, New York, 1984, pp 446-449.
- (2) *Practical Method of the Meditative Contemplation according to the Esoteric Science of Non-Being*, VoVi Friendship Association, Fountain Valley, CA, 1984, pp 8-9.



3.11 Sám Hối (repentance)

Believers of both Buddhist and Christian faiths have certain ways of getting rid of guilt and regaining the peace of mind. Catholics generally confess their sins to the confessor who then prescribes acts of penance for them to perform as proof of their repentance. Buddhists show sorrow for their sins by self-prescriptions, e.g., charities to the poor and Buddhist institutions, vegetarian diet, release of living things such as birds and fishes and sometimes adoption of monastic life. Hair cutting, even shaving one's head bald, is another conspicuous practice.

Where healing ceremonies are required, an intercessionary mediator, e.g., priest, monk, or traditional healer, is often called on to perform rituals that are supposed to be directed at illness sources such as spirits, ancestors and the patient's soul.