

Internal Heat and a Broken Stomach:

A lighthearted interpretation of common illnesses in Thai culture

By Hugh Leong

Buddhism teaches us that if we are going to be born then we must also accept that we will grow old, get sick and eventually die.

Getting sick is part of the romance of travelling and living in a foreign country. Thailand has some unique ailments and the Thai language has some very colourful words used to express them. Here are a few Thai-specific illnesses (with their English translations) that you might encounter.

Rawn Nai (internal heat). This illness is characterised by diverse symptoms such as heartburn and fever blisters. The Thais feel you get *rawn nai* when you are out of balance. One treatment is the liberal intake of a Thai herbal medicine called *yaa thaat*. This is a mixture of sodium bicarbonate, rhubarb, peppermint, camphor, and 90% alcohol. It seems to work, or at least if you drink enough of it you won't feel any pain.

Ben Lom (to have wind). This is a light headed, fainting feeling. You usually get it when you are told bad news (like, for example, that your daughter is going to marry a farang.) It is treated by waving in front of your nose one of the hundreds of different kinds of inhalers for sale in today's market. If it isn't treated quickly then you might suffer from ***Naa Muet*** (dark face). This happens when all the blood drains from your face. We see this illness on TV almost daily on the many Thai soap operas. It is usually treated by fanning the afflicted while weeping and yelling out their name at the top of your voice.

Roke Pu Ying (women's disease, a disease that men get from women) and ***Roke Pu Chai*** (men's disease, a disease that women get from men). There is a whole variety of these illnesses ranging from the merely bothersome to the very deadly. In Thailand, if you do the following two things you will remain fairly safe. Whenever you are on a motorcycle wear a helmet. At all other times wear a condom.

Tong Sia (rotten or broken stomach) aka ***Tong Dern*** (walking stomach) aka ***Tong Ruang*** (falling stomach). Any world traveller worth his or her backpack will have lots of "poop" stories. They are lots of fun to tell AFTER the fact. The last time I had *tong sia* I had two unannounced Thai house guests. We had nowhere for them to sleep so they had to sleep on the floor of our small one room cabin. That night I had to climb around them twenty seven times to get to the bathroom. With all my grunting I don't think that they got much sleep that night..

If you are lucky and have a really bad case of *tong sia* you'll wind up in the hospital ER where they will pump you full of morphine. Morphine will stop you right up and it gives you about as good a feeling as you can ever get, legally.

If you can't get morphine then you might want to try this: Just let it flow. *Tong sia* is a great, though somewhat taxing, 24 hour weight-loss program. That night when I kept my two house guests awake I lost 10 pounds.