



A Thai Herbal

Traditional Recipes for
Health and Harmony

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FINDHORN
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Chapter II

The Theory of Royal Thai Herbalism

THE FOUR BODY ELEMENTS

The physical body, in the Thai system, is made up of the same four elements that permeate the entire universe: Earth, Water, Air, and Fire. The traditional Thai conception of these elements is roughly parallel to Ayurvedic cosmology. The Thais do not believe that there is literally a speck of earth, a drop of water, or a flame of fire in each atom of the universe; each element refers not to physical substance, but to the qualities of that substance. Substances that are solid can be said to have the qualities of the Earth element. Substances that are liquid are of the Water element. Movement is the quality of the Air element. Heat is the quality of the Fire element.

According to this conception, the organs of the human body can be broken down into categories.

THE FOUR BODY ELEMENTS, THEIR QUALITIES, AND THE ORGANS THEY AFFECT		
Element	Quality	Organs
Earth	Solid	Skin, muscle, tendon, bone, viscera, fat, other solid organs
Water	Liquid	Blood, eyes, phlegm, saliva, lymph, urine, semen, other liquids in the body
Air	Movement	Respiration, digestion, excretion, motion of the limbs and joints, sexuality, aging
Fire	Heat	Body temperature, circulatory system, metabolism

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The constant interaction of the four elements gives rise to the processes of the human body and is the impetus behind physical life. It is of vital importance, therefore, to keep the four elements balanced throughout life. The elements can become unbalanced due to a variety of reasons. Environmental factors can affect the body, as for instance, when hot weather causes excess of the Fire element or rainy weather causes excess of the Water element. Food can also affect the balance, as for instance when indulgence in hot foods, sugar, and alcohol causes excess of the Fire element or indulgence in fatty and fried foods causes excess of the Earth element.

During the normal course of one's life, the elements go in and out of balance in a continuously changing state of health or disease. Children and the elderly are more susceptible to disease than average adults because of the delicate state of their elements. In children, the four elements are not yet fully mature, and in the elderly, they are weakened by many years of life. Gradually, the elements become more and more weak, and ultimately, when they are exhausted, the individual dies. The primary goal of traditional Thai dietary regimens and herbalism is to promote health and longevity by maintaining the vitality and balance of the four elements.

FOUR ELEMENT DIAGNOSTICS

According to Somchintana Ratarasarn,

It is a must for an orthodox Thai doctor to have knowledge in the four elements... The basic principle of every branch of Thai medicine, particularly internal medicine, is the knowledge of the Four Body elements, their functions, and their interrelations which affect the health/sickness of the individual. The Four Body elements are regarded as the foundation of the whole body and the foundation of life.⁵

Diagnosing disease according to the four elements is thus a crucial part of Thai herbalism. Diagnostic skills take many years to develop, and traditionally, Thai apprentices studied under able teachers for decades before they were considered to be healers in their own right.

⁵ Somchintana Ratarasarn, *The Principles and Concepts of Thai Classical Medicine* (Bangkok: Thai Khadi Research Institute, Thammasat University, 1986), 62.

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Some basic guidelines can be outlined, however, using the chart on page 15:

- Imbalance of the Earth element would manifest as symptoms of the organs associated with the Earth element. Some examples would be: skin disease, bone disease, tumors, and other “solid” disorders.
- Imbalance of the Water element would manifest as symptoms of the organs associated with the Water element such as blood disease, eye disorders, renal disease, venereal disease, bladder or urinary tract infection or stones, and any diseases manifesting in abnormal urine or other liquid discharge. (It is interesting to note that diabetes is considered to be a Water element disease, and the two types of diabetes are known in Thai as “sweet-urine disease” and “bland-urine disease.”)
- Imbalance of the Air element would manifest as symptoms of the organs associated with the Air element such as pneumonia, cough, mucous congestion, tuberculosis, bronchitis, other respiratory infections, fainting, dizziness, and arthritis. The Air element is considered to be the most important element in promoting mobility, strength, longevity, and vigor.
- Imbalance of the Fire element primarily manifests as diseases of the Fire element organs, the heart and circulatory system.

A complete picture of the organ system involved in the disease should be developed by asking questions, observing symptoms, and palpating the body of the patient. The Ayurvedic system of *tridosha* is frequently used to assist in diagnosis. (This is discussed in my book *The Spiritual Healing of Traditional Thailand*.) For those already familiar with the *Tridosha* system, this can be easily incorporated into Thai diagnosis by remembering that excessive *Vata* corresponds to excess of the Air element; excessive *Pitta* corresponds to excess of the Fire and Water elements; and excessive *Kapha* corresponds to excess of the Earth and Water elements.

Other common diagnostic techniques such as phrenology, reflexology, tongue diagnosis, and pulse diagnosis are also used by Thai healers, although they belong more properly to traditional Chinese medicine and represent later additions to the Thai system.

Once the affected organ system is pinpointed, the Thai healer would determine whether the disorder is manifesting as excess or depletion. Excess is typically accompanied by tightness, swelling, strong sharp pain, fever, skin eruptions, redness, fullness, high blood pressure, fast pulse, high body temperature, and radiation of symptoms in an outward direction. The excessive patient usually expresses anxiety,

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tension, irritability, shortness of temper and breath, and insomnia. Depletion, on the other hand, is typically accompanied by atrophy, emaciation, lack of appetite, dull aching pain, paleness, gauntness, emptiness, low blood pressure, slow pulse, low body temperature, and concentration of symptoms in an inward direction. The depleted patient usually feels weakness, dizziness, fatigue, sleepiness, and nausea.

Once the affected organ has been pinpointed, and it has been determined whether the disease is one of excess or depletion, the Thai herbalist will prescribe dietary changes and herbal supplements to either build or soothe this particular organ.

The newcomer to Thai herbalism should keep in mind the above points but should also recognize that even in allopathic medicine, diagnostic skill can sometimes be an art rather than a science. Symptoms can often appear as a mix of excess and depletion, and can appear in more than one organ system. For example, a patient with excessive Fire element may also exhibit depleted Air. This individual could manifest with heart disease, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, anxiety attacks, short temper, reddish color in the face, and a voracious appetite—all symptoms of Fire element excess. At the same time, he or she could exhibit chronic low-level lung infections, blocked sinuses, and a persistent cough—symptoms of Air depletion.

THE TEN TASTES

Herbal medicines are traditionally broken down into ten “taste” classifications according to the primary taste of the herb. Since each element is associated with several organs and organ systems, and since each element is associated with several tastes, the tastes provide the link between diagnosis and herbal therapy. According to Trond and Schumacher,

The taste rules are never elevated to being absolute and all-encompassing, but are regarded as “rules of thumb”... [nevertheless] the taste rules provide us in fact with the main links between theory and practice.⁶

The information in the chart opposite may be used to determine both the herbs and food which a patient should be given to help with an imbalance of elements and those which he or she should avoid to prevent further aggravation of such a condition.

⁶ Viggo Brun and Trond Schumacher, *Traditional Herbal Medicine in Northern Thailand* (Bangkok: White Lotus, 1994), 31.

THE TEN TASTES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE ELEMENTS		
Taste	Increases	Decreases
Astringent	Air	Earth, Water, Fire
Oily (Nutty)	Earth, Water, Fire	Air
Salty	Earth, Water, Fire	Air
Sweet	Earth, Water	Air, Fire
Bitter	Air	Earth, Water, Fire
Toxic (Nauseating)	Air, Fire	Earth, Water
Sour	Water, Fire	Earth, Air
Hot (Spicy)	Air, Fire	Earth, Water
Bland	Earth, Water, Air	Fire
Aromatic (Cool)	Earth, Water, Air	Fire

To continue with the example from the previous section, the excess Fire and depleted Air patient could be given astringent, sweet, bitter, bland and aromatic food and herbs to calm the Fire element, and would stay away from oily, salty, toxic, sour, and hot herbs and food in order not to build more Fire. Likewise, he or she could take astringent, bitter, toxic, hot, bland, and aromatic herbs and food to build the Air element, while staying away from oily, salty, sweet, and sour herbs and food to avoid depleting Air. When you put all of this together, considering the mixed symptoms the patient is exhibiting, it seems that the best course of action would be for the individual to take astringent, bitter, bland and aromatic herbs and food, and to avoid oily, salty, and sour herbs and food. Since the sweet, toxic, and hot tastes are indicated in one case and contraindicated in the other, they should probably be avoided as well. The chart on pages 20–22 illustrates some more connections between certain disorders and the ten tastes.

The tastes and some examples of food and herbs are listed in the chart *Herbs and Foods Classified by the Ten Tastes* on page 23. For more information on particular herbs and their uses, refer to the individual entries in the compendium of herbs (*Chapter VI* of this book).

In referring to the compendium and the indices, you will note that some herbs are listed in traditional sources in more than one taste category. This is most often due to the different tastes of different parts of the plant. For example, the lemon, kaffir lime, and common lime possess sour fruit and bitter rinds. Herbs may also be listed in multiple categories if they possess what Western herbalists call “double-action.”

THE TEN TASTES: THERAPEUTIC USES

This chart should be used as a general guideline. Individual entries in the herbal compendium should be consulted, as each herb has its own particular therapeutic uses.

Taste	Action	For Treatment of	Contraindications
Astringent	Hemostatic Topical astringent Topical antiseptic Diuretic Hepatic Digestive Stomachic Antirheumatic	Internal bleeding wounds Dysentery and other diarrhea Pus, discharge Water retention Liver and stomach disease Sluggish digestion Arthritis	Constipation
Oily	Nutritive tonic	Impaired strength, energy, vitality Chronically low body temperature Stiff and sore joints, muscles, and tendons Skin disease, itching	Obesity
Salty	Laxative Antiseptic	Constipation Flatulence Sluggish digestion Excessive mucous in digestive tract Mouth sores	Chronic thirst Dehydration
Sweet	Nutritive tonic Demulcent	Impaired strength energy, vitality Chronic disease, low immunity Chronic fatigue exhaustion	Diabetes Hypoglycemia Gum disease

Taste	Action	For Treatment of	Contraindications
<i>Sweet, continued</i>		Convalescence from disease or injury Asthma Sore throat, Cough	Tooth decay
Bitter	Bitter tonic Tonic for blood and bile Antipyretic Alterative Cholagogue Hepatic Lymphatic	Diseases of blood and bile Parasites and infection in blood Fever Dengue, malaria Low immune system	Chronic fatigue
Toxic	Detoxifier Anthelmintic Vermifuge Purgative Analgesic Antiseptic	Systemic infections Tetanus Venereal diseases Cholera, dysentery Diarrhea Gastro-intestinal parasites Infections Festering wounds	These herbs have a nauseating taste or smell, and should only be used with caution. Not prescribed for children or elderly patients.
Sour	Expectorant Pectoral Refrigerant Nervine Diuretic	Congested mucous Respiratory infections Asthma Bronchitis Cough Fever	

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Taste	Action	For Treatment of	Contraindications
<i>Sour, continued</i>		Infection of blood, lymph Sluggish circulation Clarity of mind and senses	
Hot	General stimulant Digestive Carminative Cardiac Expectorant Aphrodisiac Anti-inflammatory Antispasmodic Diaphoretic	Low immunity Chronic fatigue Sluggish digestion Indigestion Flatulence Constipation Sinusitis Common cold, nasal congestion Sore or cramping muscles	Fever Hypertension Cardiac disease
Aromatic	Cardiac tonic Hepatic Pectoral Nervine Sedative Calmative Stimulant Female tonic	Heart disease Circulatory problems Diseases of liver and lungs Chronic anxiety, tension, stress Hypertension Psychological and emotional imbalances Chronic fatigue, exhaustion Depression Mental clarity and well-being Post-partum depression	Aromatics are typically administered through sauna or steam, which should be avoided by those suffering from fever, heart disease or high blood pressure. Tea may be taken instead.
Bland	Detoxifier Diuretic	Food or chemical poisoning Chronic thirst	

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Herbs with double-action have the ability to both stimulate and relax. They act to regulate the body and mind by balancing excessive or depleted energy. Thai herbs that possess the qualities of double-action include Camphor, Eucalyptus, Ginseng, Lemongrass, Peppermint, and Star Anise.

CLASSIFICATION OF HERBS BY ACTION

Many readers will be familiar with the classification by action used in Western herbalism. In addition to the ten tastes, a second classification system exists within traditional Thai herbalism which closely parallels the Western method. This system classifies herbs strictly by their action on the body, not by any property of the herb itself. Used in conjunction with the tastes, the classification by action can give the herbalist a full picture of the therapeutic benefits of a particular herb.

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The Thai system of classification by action includes the following major categories.⁷ For a complete list of herbs by their action, see the *Index by Action* at the end of this book.

Anthelmintic and **vermifuge** herbs destroy and expel tapeworms, bacteria, yeast, and other parasites from the digestive tract. They usually possess laxative qualities as well but are sometimes taken in combination with more powerful purgatives to effectively expel the parasites.

Anti-inflammatory herbs are used topically to lessen inflammation caused by bruises, contusions, sprains, and other internal injuries, as well as inflammation associated with boils, animal bites, and contact with poisonous plants or insects such as bees and scorpions.

Antipyretic herbs are used primarily to bring down fevers and accompanying symptoms like chronic thirst and fever blisters. These herbs are mainly used to control symptoms and are generally combined with purgatives to expel disease. Bitter antipyretics are known in Western herbalism as bitter tonics. (See also Tonics.)

Aphrodisiac herbs heighten sexual potency and arousal in either sex. These herbs function by stimulating and strengthening bodily functions and therefore may also serve as stimulants and tonics. Most stimulants and tonics are also, conversely, aphrodisiacs. (See also Male and Female Tonics.)

Astringent herbs (not to be confused with the classification of astringent taste discussed in the previous section, although there is much overlap) have the effect of drying up bodily secretions and discharges. They are used internally to counter diarrhea, dysentery, and internal bleeding, or externally to cleanse the skin and promote healing of wounds. They should not be used in the case of food or chemical poisoning, when the body's natural impulse is to purge these toxins.

⁷ For ease of readability, I have not used the Thai language in classifying these herbs. Instead, I have relied upon the work of Somchintana Ratarasarn, who has translated these categories into English and has shown how many of these categories are roughly interchangeable with their Western counterparts. Much of the information in this section is from his book, *The Principles and Concepts of Thai Classical Medicine*. It should be noted that some of the herbs in this collection have not been fully evaluated by Western herbalists, and therefore may never have been classified before anywhere else. When faced with this situation, I have taken the Thai tradition at its word and classified the plant accordingly. That is to say, for example, that if Thai traditional medicine uses a particular plant as an anthelmintic, in this book I have classified it as such.

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Carminative and **antacid** herbs are used to dispel gas from the digestive tract. Carminatives work on the lower intestines, for cases of flatulence and bloated bowels. For cases of heartburn, gastritis, and other ailments of the upper digestive tract, see Stomachics.

Cholagogue herbs treat diseases of the gall bladder. They stimulate the production of bile and are thus useful for treatment of chronic intestinal problems. Traditionally, disorder of the bile is held to be the physical cause of psychological symptoms such as delirium and hallucination.

Diuretic herbs are used traditionally to treat any disease in which the urine becomes abnormal. These herbs help dispel toxins from the body by promoting urination and have a tonifying and strengthening effect on the kidneys. Diuretics are used in treatment of kidney stones and other disorders of the kidneys and bladder, for obesity, water-retention, and gout (caused by build-up of uric acid). They are also used for diabetes. Diuretics should not be used in patients that exhibit constipation.

Emetic herbs cause vomiting. Many herbs are emetic at toxic levels, but some are non-toxic emetics, which can be useful for purging the stomach. Emetics are also used to purge severe congestion or infection of the chest, bronchi, and sinuses by the catharsis of vomiting.

Emmenagogues regulate the menstrual cycle. They are used for all gynecological problems in which the first sign is the abnormality of the menses (abnormal color, timing, duration, amount, etc.), which Thai medicine considers to be an indication of the general state of health of the reproductive system as a whole. Many of these herbs can also be used for uterine infections, cysts, tumors, and cancers as they increase the flow of blood and promote regular function of the female reproductive system. Emmenagogues are also used to enhance fertility.

Expectorant herbs encourage the expulsion of mucous from the body. They are particularly useful in treatment of colds with congestion, sinus congestion, and mucous build-up in the stomach and bowels. Most expectorants are also antitussives, used to treat coughs.

Hepatics are herbs that have a beneficial effect on the liver. These are used in treatment of disorders and malfunctions of the liver caused by internal injury, toxicity, cirrhosis, and hepatitis.

Pectoral herbs tonify and strengthen the respiratory organs.

Purgatives and **alteratives** are herbs which cleanse the organs, purify the blood, and detoxify the tissues, bringing health and vitality to the body. Some purgatives are mild laxatives that can be used occasionally in fasting and for general constipation. Some have stronger laxative qualities and are used for vigorous cleansing of the bowels. Alteratives have no laxative quality but have a detoxifying effect on the stomach, kidneys, bladder, and blood. Purgatives and alteratives are used in treatment of systemic infection, parasites, or disease, for fevers, contagious viral and bacterial diseases, cancers, and in cases of food or chemical poisoning. They should not be used by pregnant women, children, the elderly, or extremely weak or chronically exhausted patients, as they may lack the strength required for detoxification.

Refrigerants are herbs which lower the body's temperature. They are used traditionally to lower fevers, and usually make great cold drinks in the summertime.

Sedatives and **calmatives** are used to counteract psycho-physiological disturbances such as stress, insomnia, heart palpitations, panic attacks, and severe anxiety. These herbs range in effect from mild (jasmine) to pronounced (opium) and are prescribed according to severity of symptoms.

Stimulants heighten all of the physiological processes of the body. They encourage digestion, enhance the senses, and tonify the immune system. Stimulants are often used as adjuvants (helping herbs), especially in diseases where weakness or fatigue is prevalent.

- **Cardiac Stimulants** are tonics for the heart. They are used to counter hypotension and to increase strength and vitality of the heart muscle, circulation, and veins. Stimulants should be avoided by those with high blood pressure or chronic anxiety.

Stomachics encourage the proper function of the upper digestive system. Stomachics are used to treat indigestion, peptic ulcer, gastritis, and other disorders of the stomach. These herbs increase the appetite and are used often in cases of cachexia (the general emaciation, weakness, and physical wasting associated with long-term chronic diseases). By stimulating digestion they allow the body to better assimilate nutrients, and are therefore useful for many types of disease, as well as for promoting general health and vigor.

Tonics are herbs that strengthen the body, encourage immunity, and promote the natural healing process.

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- **Nutritive Tonics** are used to treat emaciation, weakness, fatigue, and paralysis, and are especially prescribed during convalescence from chronic or long-term illness. Many of these tonics have specific effects on the immune, the nervous, and the reproductive systems. Nutritive tonics are useful as adjuvants (helping herbs) in any treatment for chronic disease and are also useful as daily supplements for children and the elderly.
- **Female Tonics** are herbs which strengthen the female reproductive organs. Some are prescribed to enhance fertility or to regulate the menstrual cycle; some are especially given to strengthen uterine function during pregnancy, while others are used to tonify and heal the reproductive system immediately after giving birth.
- **Male Tonics** are used to treat male impotence, premature ejaculation, and other male sexual dysfunction.
- **Blood Tonics** and **Lymphatics** are used to treat what in Thai is called "bad blood" and "bad lymph". These are generalized states of infection or toxicity that manifest in symptoms such as rashes, acne, boils, and other skin eruptions, pale skin, fainting spells, fatigue, and frequent or recurring fevers. Malaria and other blood-borne parasites would fall under this category, as would blood poisoning, leukemia, and lymphatic cancer. Animal blood is sometimes called for in remedies, especially that of the rhinoceros, horse, and the langur monkey, but there are many herbal medicines as well.

Vulnerary and **Emmolient** herbs are used topically to promote the healing of wounds and burns of the skin. These herbs may be used externally as topical salves and balms, or internally for treatment of internal injuries, bruising, and hemorrhage.

WESTERN CLASSIFICATION OF HERBS

In compiling this collection, I have found it useful to include several classifications that are not properly part of the traditional Thai system. These are terms common to Western herbalism, and while there may be some degree of overlap with the preceding classes, they are used in this collection side by side with traditional Thai terminology for ease of reference.

I have taken the liberty of classifying many of the herbs in this collection in accordance with these Western categories in addition to

the traditional Thai categories. For example, if Thai medicine prescribes an herb to combat nausea, I have listed it as an antiemetic—even though this category does not exist in traditional Thai classification—in order to assist the Western herbalist using this book as a reference. (For a complete list of herbs by their action, see *Index by Action*.)

Analgesic herbs lessen pain. Most can be used both internally and topically. The pain-relieving properties of the plants listed in this collection range from anodynes such as cloves to potent anesthetics like opium. Analgesics should always be administered internally with care, as they may have a pronounced physiological effect.

Antiallergic herbs are natural antihistamines which soothe the symptoms of hayfever-like allergies.

Antiemetic herbs treat symptoms of nausea and vomiting.

Antioxidants are herbs containing high levels of oxidation-retarding compounds such as vitamins A and C. These herbs are naturally detoxifying and contribute to long-term health, immunity, and longevity.

Antipruritics calm itchiness of the skin associated with allergic reactions and rashes.

Antirheumatic herbs are used to soothe joint pain and inflammation and are especially used for cases of arthritis, chronic back pain, and repetitive stress injuries.

Antiseptics are used on the surface of the skin to treat ulcers, sores, bacterial infections, fungus, parasites, and other skin diseases. Many of the herbs listed under this category may be used orally as well for tooth and gum disease, cold sores, and abscesses.

Antispasmodic herbs counteract spasms and muscular cramps. Many are used in conjunction with expectorants and/or antitussives to treat severe cases of cough, and some act as bronchodilators useful in treating asthmatics.

Antitumor herbs have been shown to shrink or halt the growth of cysts and tumors. Many of these traditional herbs are being researched for beneficial effects against cancers of all types.

Antitussives are herbs which soothe cough, sore throat, and other cold symptoms.

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Appetizers improve appetite. They are useful to overcome wasting diseases, emaciation, and lack of hunger. Many are also digestives, which promote the digestive function.

Bitter Tonics stimulate the digestion, the immune system, the blood, and the internal organs. They have particularly beneficial effects on the liver and bile. They provide general detoxification, blood cleansing, internal antibacterial action, and aid in convalescence from persistent or chronic diseases. They are also important in the treatment of cancer, tumors, hepatitis, diabetes, blood diseases, and systemic infections.

Bronchodilators open the bronchi and other respiratory passages. These are used to treat disorders, inflammations, and infections of the respiratory system, colds with chest congestion, bronchitis, tuberculosis, and especially, asthma.

Demulcent herbs soothe irritations of membranes with a moistening effect. They can be used internally in cases of dry cough or externally for irritations, dry or chapped skin, burns, and dry hair.

Diaphoretic herbs promote sweating, usually by raising the body temperature. They are useful to break a fever, to warm the body, and to dispel toxins through the pores. Due to their detoxifying action, diaphoretics are used to treat colds, flu, skin diseases, rheumatism, and lymph problems.

Digestives promote digestion and assimilation of foods by encouraging the body's natural digestive processes and by aiding in the breaking down of foods in the gastrointestinal tract.

Galactagogue herbs increase the production and/or quality of breast milk.

Hemostatic herbs are used internally or externally to halt bleeding.

Laxative herbs are intestinal stimulants. They have a milder effect than purgatives on the bowels and are useful for symptomatic treatment of constipation.