

Diagnosis

Having made a general physical examination, a Tibetan doctor employs three main methods of diagnosis: pulse reading, urine examination and questioning (case history).

Pulse Reading

This is one of the most sophisticated aspects of Tibetan medicine and arguably based on one of the finest sensitivities known to humankind. It takes many years and the examination of thousands of patients for a doctor to become truly proficient in it. The process, involving a detailed palpation of both radial arteries, is called *listening to the pulse*, the pulse being considered *the messenger that carries messages from the illness to the doctor*. Sitting facing the patient, the physician takes one wrist at a time and, in great stillness, “listens in” for several minutes, attuning, through the behaviour of twelve different sections of the pulse, to the functioning of the patient’s vital organs and overall metabolism. This works most precisely at dawn, when the metabolism is in a neutral phase between sleeping and waking. Hospitalised patients suffering from serious illnesses will be palpated at this key time. When out visiting other patients, the doctor will need to consider the time of day and take into account the influence upon their pulse of the metabolic and elemental factors active at that moment of the daily cycle.

Before taking the pulse, the doctor examines the patient’s eyes, ears, tongue, complexion and glands and feels the general temperature of the forehead. He or she may also enquire of the patient which of the three 'constitutional' pulses is their usual one. These three types of healthy pulse, found in both men and women, are:

- C a *male* constitutional pulse, which is bulky and beats grossly,
- C a *female* constitutional pulse, which is fine and beats rapidly and
- C a “*bodhisattva*” constitutional pulse, which is drawn out, smooth and supple.

The physician must also take into account the seasonal influence, knowing that at any moment of the year a pulse-beat typical of the season will predominate. This must not be mistaken for a sign of

abnormality in the vital organs. The physician places his index, middle and ring fingers on the radial arteries of the patient's wrists. First the general nature of the illness needs to be established. Using the rhythm of his own breathing as a standard, the doctor measure the rapidity of the patient's pulse. It is considered 'normal' when five beats can be counted during one inhalation and exhalation by the doctor. Faster than that indicates a 'hot' disorder and less indicates a 'cold' disorder. The doctor then looks further, observing six areas of information on each wrist, concerning twelve main organs:

- C the six "full" organs: heart, liver, lungs, two kidneys and spleen and
- C the six "hollow" organs: stomach, gall- bladder, urinary bladder, large intestine, small intestine and either the ovaries for a woman or the seminal vesicle for a man.

Urine Examination

Urine samples offer the physician less information about the vital organs than pulse analysis. But they do provide a simple and effective way of detecting humoral imbalance. They can also reveal many signs of specific types of ailment. The urine may be analysed at three different stages: when freshly passed, while still lukewarm (as it starts to settle) and when cold. The doctor observes its colour, consistency, sedimentation and film and also stirs it vigorously to observe its behaviour when agitated.

Questioning

This takes two main forms. *Straightforward questions* enquire into symptoms, their duration, case history, diet, possible causes for the onset of illness, patient's habits, what the patient has been doing at home, at work and so on and so forth. *Covert questioning*, i.e. using trick questions or questioning other members of the family, is used when it is felt that the patient is not being totally frank about his or her illness or such things as observance of prescriptions.

These three main forms of diagnosis help each other:

- C Pulse helps to discern diseases of the full organs and to make an initial prognosis of survival

or death.

- C Urine helps to detect diseases of the hollow organs and to distinguish between hot and cold disorders.
- C Questioning brings further information.

	Doctor's RIGHT hand MALE PATIENT'S LEFT HAND	Doctor's LEFT hand MALE PATIENT'S RIGHT HAND
upper side of INDEX	<i>heart</i> Fire	<i>lungs</i> Metal
lower side of INDEX	<i>small intestine</i> Fire	<i>large intestine</i> Metal
upper side of MIDDLE FINGER	<i>spleen</i> Earth	<i>liver</i> Wood
lower side of MIDDLE FINGER	<i>stomach</i> Earth	<i>gall-bladder</i> Wood
upper side of RING FINGER	<i>left kidney</i> Water	<i>right kidney</i> Water
lower side of RING FINGER	<i>seminal vesicle / ovaries</i> Water	<i>urinary bladder</i> Water

The twelve sections of the pulse and the corresponding parts of the doctor's fingers which palpate them.

Earth	Wood	Earth	Fire	Earth	Metal	Earth	Water
18	72	18	72	18	72	18	72
	Spring		Summer		Autumn		Winter

The cycle of the elements during the year. The figures 18 and 72 represents duration in lunar days

THE FIVE SEASONAL PULSES

SEASON	ELEMENT	ORGAN	PULSE Type
Spring	Wood	<i>liver</i>	thin and taut like lark song
Summer	Fire	<i>heart</i>	thick and long like cuckoo call
Autumn	Metal	<i>lungs</i>	short and rough like cricket's whirring
Winter	Water	<i>kidneys</i>	smooth and slow like snipe call
Intermediate	Earth	<i>spleen</i>	short and smooth like sparrow's chirps

Organ pulses are more active in certain seasons than others, and this should be understood

by the doctor, who might otherwise think of them as ailing

'FEEL' OF SIX HOT PULSES	'FEEL' OF SIX COLD PULSES
Strong	Weak
Prominent	Sunken
Substantial	Deficient
Fast	Slow
Taut	Loose
Firm	Empty