

# Lung: The Meditator's Disease

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*“The most important aspect of retreat is to keep your mind happy.... Practice should be free of looking for results. Even if you spend your entire life doing practice and have not a single experience, no results at all, it should still be a cause for great joy to have spent your life like that.”—Geshe Lhundup Sopa*

Lung (pronounced “loong”), or ‘meditator’s disease’, happens to almost every meditator, even very experienced ones. It is similar to an athlete who strains a muscle and then has to rest for a while to let that muscle heal. We meditators strain our nervous systems. Some of us already have a strained nervous system when we begin our meditation practice. Unless the lung is very severe, it is nothing to be afraid of or to worry about, it is just a trade hazard that we can learn to work with and endure. Lung is our teacher because it is the feedback we receive when we are not meditating properly – or not living a balanced lifestyle.

Lung is the Tibetan word for ‘wind’. Generally, meditator’s lung is congested chi in and around the heart chakra. We all learn about lung when we attend our first Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist group meditation retreat. Either we get it, or we hear about it from our friends who get it. Lung literally means wind but we can translate it, in this context, as ‘mental stress’. The mind rides on the subtle winds of the body, and when the winds don’t run smoothly, we feel stress.

When many people begin a retreat on a Tibetan mantra yoga sadhana practice that involves visualizing complicated forms, reciting liturgy, and reciting mantras, they discover after a week or a month that their minds

actually become more agitated than they were before. They may experience pain in the chest or back pain, or headaches; they may cry easily and anger easily, too. They may feel anxious or have panic attacks or insomnia. Some people become depressed. Some people have delusional paranoia, hear things, or feel strange sensations in their bodies. Others have indigestion, constipation, or diarrhea. Lung is often experienced as a negative attitude toward the practice (your mind and body want to stop!) so you experience doubts about the practice, doubts about your lama. Lung can become bad if it is not remedied, and if the person continues the pattern that causes it, it's possible to become severely mentally disturbed. But that is rare. Mostly it's just a negative mind or a nagging obsession that won't go away. Sometimes lung manifests as an aversion to meditating. You just don't want to go back and sit on that cushion!

Anyone under mental pressure and strain experiences lung. Meeting deadlines at work, family stress, and studying for final exams all bring on lung. Everyone has their own style of lung. It's a good idea to learn your personal pattern so you can know when to relax in your retreat. When you start to feel negative or can't sleep one night or have indigestion, or when you uncontrollably growl at someone, then you know it is time to rest, to back off on the intensity of your practice. Often there are signs that indicate lung is on the verge of breaking out into major symptoms. For me, I almost always have an anxiety dream based on the theme of the night before a final exam at university when I haven't studied at all and I'm frantic. That tells me, "Time to slow down, Nyingje-la!" When I used to start designing fashions in my meditation sessions while reciting a mantra, I knew it was time for a good long break and a walk.

When some of our wonderful Tibetan masters first encountered people from modern industrialized societies, they were impressed with our level of education and intellectual acuity; thus, they assumed we would make great practitioners. They taught us advanced practices and soon watched us all get lung! I think this is rather like a figure skating master who discovers a group of ballet dancers and thinks they will make great figure skaters. The ballet dancers get out on the ice and try to dance, and they all end up with sprained ankles and broken bones. We have these greatly activated minds, but they developed without any awareness of the winds that carry those mind-bytes. Watching our breath and learning about our wind-mind before we add all the

visualizations and mantras is like skating round and round the rink for hours and hours before we even try to turn around on the skates.

Geshe Rabten thought all Westerners have tsog lung (chronic heart lung). After he spent a year leading a calm abiding retreat for Westerners, Gen Lamrimpa said to us that he thought Westerners could never learn to meditate: Our minds are too fast because we grew up with machines and computers. In other words, we all have chronic low-grade anxiety or tsog lung. It is so ubiquitous that we think it is normal. There is an epidemic of depression and anxiety in modern industrialized society that is growing rapidly, even among children. Our lifestyle gives us lung. This same source of most of our health problems is also what causes us to have a difficult time in meditation retreats.

When we talk about lung, we must distinguish between acute lung and chronic lung. Acute lung comes from concentrating too hard on the mandala or reciting mantras too fast or working too hard in service at our jobs, or frustration in relationships. Chronic lung can be treated with herbs, diet, acupuncture, Tibetan medicine, and talking therapies. I would try these options before going to pharmaceuticals because in the long run these chemicals may only compound the imbalance.

However, when symptoms are especially intense, people may need immediate relief. You might decide to take pharmaceuticals for a short time, with the help of other supportive therapies, and then slowly wean yourself off them. I would recommend checking with a lama before taking any pharmaceutical chemicals. It is my impression that they are dispensed far too easily, and they may harm the body and mind in the long term. If a person is willing to change their eating habits, take herbs, or go to an acupuncturist and/or a skillful psychotherapist, pharmaceutical medicines are most likely not necessary.

### **How and why we get lung**

Kirti Tsenshab Rinpoche told us that faith and intention are the main activities of tantric practice. This is so important. We get lung because we don't know this essential ingredient. We get too serious and try very hard to see all the details of the mandala and to say thousands of mantras a day, thinking that more is better. This gives us lung.

In Tibetan medicine, lung (wind) imbalance is related to attachment; bile imbalance is related to anger/aversion; and phlegm imbalance is related to ignorance. At first, it may not be so clear how unskillful meditation that leads to lung is related to attachment. If you think of attachment as the mind that wants, that grasps, that clings, and then check up while you meditate, you can see how a subtle version of grasping and clinging can abide with you as you focus on your meditation object. It comes in the form of wanting more clarity than you have, or wanting to finish up, or not wanting to finish. If you are in a neutral state of mind, and then think of something you want to do, you can feel a slight tightening in your chest, a little excitement or anticipation. Most of us think this is happiness, but it is actually a state of grasping. This can also cause lung.

### **Those who do – and don't – get lung**

People who meditate for stress reduction purposes only and aren't interested in attaining enlightenment probably don't get lung. We get lung because we are trying to do something, trying to attain something, instead of relaxing and letting it happen naturally. Lung comes from forcing our mind beyond its capacity to stay relaxed while meditating. The key to good meditation is a relaxed mind. Forcing the mind to concentrate only harms our development in the long run. This is very hard to learn because we don't often know when we are forcing our mind – until we get lung! We are habituated to having a slightly grasping or excited mind when we do things, because this is often where we find the energy to do what we want to do; but this does not work for us when we want to meditate. We get lung from forcing our minds to stay on the meditation object when it is tired. We get lung from saying the mantra too fast and for too long. We get lung from forcing a visualization to be clear. We get lung from trying to keep the thoughts at bay instead of understanding that it's okay for thoughts to come and go. What we are looking for is to stabilize on the mind that lies below the thoughts. No accepting and no rejecting...the ocean, not the waves...remember?

Lung usually comes on very slowly, after days of forcing concentration or reciting mantras too fast without being aware of it. By the time you realize you have lung, it's very hard to dissipate without stopping the meditation altogether and resting the mind for a few days by engaging in fun and play. Lung just seems to be part of learning how to do Vajrayana

practice. The more you practice, the sooner you identify the habits that lead to lung, and therefore it becomes less and less of a problem.

The more you meditate, the more you are able to perceive the texture of your mind, so you can see or hear the mistakes just as an artist or a musician would. It just takes time on the cushion. Like any other form of discipline, it only becomes easy with a lot of effort...right effort: gentle, loving, relaxed, no expectation, no pushing effort. We need to remember that one of the four powers of joyous effort in Shantideva's teachings on the six perfections is the power of rest. In modern industrialized society, resting is a sign of weakness. Rest is just as important as activity in manifesting any sort of production.

Tibetan masters describe the process of meditation as being similar to training a wild horse. If you tether it to a short rope and try to beat it into submission, you will have a very difficult time taming that horse. But if you give it a large corral to run in and approach the wild animal with kindness and love, you can ride that horse in a short while. Remember the movie, *The Horse Whisperer*? We have to learn to relax our minds and treat ourselves very gently. Ribur Rinpoche tells us over and over again, "...r..e..l..a..x...." This is the key to meditation without lung.

### **Lung prevention and management:**

1. Don't push yourself, your body or your mind – more is not better and might is not right. Whatever you do, do it for others!
2. Prostrate before sessions or do chi gong in the breaks. Twice a day is good, if you can.
3. Begin your session with a quiet time, calming your mind, tuning in to your energy. Breathe into your lower chakras and let the anxiety come out. Melt the tension with the experience of refuge. Soothe your inner child; listen kindly to its complaints.
4. End your session with five minutes of spacious meditation, just relaxing into the three circles of emptiness of dedication or relax at the dissolution time. Even though you want to get up, just sit and breathe into the mental tension until your mind is relaxed. Aim to end the session before you are tired. Also, you can visualize your hollow body filled with

five-colored lights radiating out all the lung and blessing all the sentient beings and the environment.

**5.** Spend a little time every day, if possible, relaxing your gaze by looking up at the sky or staring out at a long distance view as you gently recognize emptiness. This really lets the lung out.

**6.** Eat enough protein and cut back on (not cut out!) all sweets. Eat a well-balanced diet, suited to your body type and health needs, i.e., study nutrition. Exercise six days a week.

**7.** Learn to relax in all your actions. Meditation is play, not work. Relax: Lie down or sit in a comfortable chair or do chi gong for a few minutes after your session ends. (This is advice from His Holiness the Dalai Lama.)

**8.** Don't force your visualization. Be satisfied with what comes.

**9.** Contentment is the key to a good retreat; cultivate contentment and a happy mind. Meditate on the innermost jewels of the Kadam geshe every day. The key to contentment is breathing with bodhichitta all the time. Detach yourself from grasping experiences by a deep understanding of karma, and let go of all notions of blame and shame. "Follow your bliss," as Joseph Campbell used to say.

**10.** 'Set your re-set button' once a week, if not once a day. That is, recreate until you feel grounded, open, joyful, clear, and motivated.