



Xông hơi  
**Vietnamese**  
 herbal steam therapies

By **Bruce Bentley**  
 PART 2 IN A STEAMY SERIES

There are two secular schools of traditional medical practice in Vietnam. The “northern school” or *thuoc bac* essentially borrows the philosophy, source materials and practices of traditional Chinese medicine, while the “southern school” or *thuoc nam* has its roots in Vietnam. This “medicine to suit southern people,” as intended by its founder, the Buddhist monk and physician Tue Tinh, began with a source materia medica of native herbs and prescriptions, which included reference to an assemblage of practical therapeutic skills. These, we can be confident, had already been practised for centuries by the common people of his homeland in the Red River Delta in northern Vietnam. Yet unlike in the north, there has been no documentation of the vibrant repertoire of practices by the people of the south, who when all is said and done were largely unaffected by Tue Tinh and the north. This essay will investigate the herbal steaming practices that exist in Ho Chi Minh City and throughout the Mekong Delta. But before we get to some herbal steaming recipes, let’s first take in the panorama of the practice’s folk context.

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 IETNAM’S LONG COASTLINE, mountains, thick jungles, lush plains and river deltas, together with a tropical climate down south and semi-tropical type up north, makes for a diverse mix of endemic regional flora and local herbal practice. These two zones also have divergent histories, and while not wishing to overplay divisions among a fraternity of like people, historically each has been culturally influenced in separate ways. The southern region has mostly been swayed by India, Cambodia, and to a lesser extent Thailand and Laos, whereas big neighbour China has put an unmistakable stamp on the north. When I spoke to Dr Truong Thin, director of the Institute of Traditional Medicine in Ho Chi Minh City, in 2000 about these regional distinctions, he said: “China, along with its complex medical ideas, has had a powerful influence throughout northern Vietnam, but down south, more easily applied methods were readily accepted and used.” George Coedès (1968:xv), the eminent scholar of southeast Asian history, confirmed: “It is significant to note that Northern Vietnam was the only region in South East Asia whose history developed outside Indian influence.”

While it is not necessary to expand further than I do later about this sideways shift of influence on the south in relation to herbal steam therapy, it does involve sharing a significant number of the plants particular to the tropical westward zone across Asia, a meaningful rub from Indian medical theory and its various practices, plus the impact of Theravada Buddhism, the most popular faith in the south which was originally brought across from southern India. All have made an indelible impression on the way in which southerners go about herbal steaming.

For the fiercely determined and self-reliant Vietnamese, herbal steam therapy (*xong hoi* pronounced “shom hoy” meaning “to penetrate the body with steam”), along with diet (*an kieng*), cupping (*giac hoi*), *cao gio* (aka *gua sha*), massage (*dam bop*) and plucking (*giat gio*) comprise a pool of folk treatments (*y hoc dan toc* or “common people’s medicine”) devised to deal with a swath of illness, pain and emergency situations in a practical, no-fuss way. Conveniently, and to save the patient from needing to venture outside after treatment, these are all best performed in the home, where there is typically at least one family member who has a working knowledge of one or more of these practices. At a basic level they are all easy enough to accomplish, and are performed either as a stand-alone or in combination. When treating stiff muscles for example, steaming can soften and open the skin pores before scrap-

ing “poisonous” wind (*sha* in the Chinese context) from its lodgment within the surface tissue with *cao gio*, or before drawing out deeper pathogens with cupping. Having the need to attend to a health concern also invariably means initiating a change in diet, which is deemed to be a fundamental requisite.<sup>1</sup> The need to rest the stomach and offset any systemic disharmonies from a hot/cold perspective is a virtual given. This strategy of supporting the inside and the outside at the same time not only helps to resolve the initial stage of most illnesses, but also guards against any pathogenic factors moving deeper internally. Personally, I would rate the Vietnamese as being the most informed lay practitioners I have come to know.<sup>2</sup>

### Folk medical practices

The roots of folk medicine, writes Grossman (1986:166), “are in the urgency of accidents and injuries, the wounds of enemy stones and arrows, the assault of hostile weather, the attacks of frightened vicious animals. In short, all external threats to survival demand medicine.” This has led the Vietnamese to equip themselves with some of the most primordial and rational calls to therapeutic action. Steaming engages the biological necessity of inhalation and brings medicated vapours into the body, while elevating the body temperature which produces sweating and releases toxins and wastes; *cao gio* and massage engage the relief brought about by

■ Opposite page: artist Mr Duy Thai, Ho Chi Minh City, 2000. (Bruce’s collection)

**Tue Tinh advised**, “Behind your house, a small patch of land is sufficient for a medicinal garden.” (Hoang, Pho and Huu, 1993:16). He researched the value of hundreds of indigenous Vietnamese plants and wrote two books: *Nam Doc Than Hieu* (The Miraculous Efficacy of Southern Medicines), in which described 580 indigenous drugs in 3873 prescriptions for 10 clinical specialties, and *Hong Nghia Giac Tu Thu* (Medical Book from the Village of Hong Nghia), which abridged the indications for 630 herbs.

In his quest to advance methods of curing that “could be adopted for ready use by ordinary people,” Tue Tinh promoted “treatments such as steam baths, moxibustion, massage, poultices and others” according to Huong, Phu and Huu (1993:18). They add:

“The Vietnamese people have inherited from Tue Tinh a great number of simple but effective medical formulas that every family still uses from generation to generation: hot onion soup, steam baths with ginger and aromatic leaves

to reduce fever; garlic to combat fainting caused by draughts; sudorifico [agents that cause sweating] to treat colds; massage of the navel region with garlic to combat retention of urine and constipation; massage with ginger and beet seeds in cases of indigestion; application of plaster made from kapok-tree bark and sticky rice to cure fractures; moxibustion with wormwood against chills; infusion of tangerine peel to stop indigestion; young guava buds to cure diarrhea, and so on.”



Tue Tihn (Monnais, Laurence, Thompson, C. Michele and Wahlberg, Ayo (eds), 2012: frontcover).

rubbing; cupping at its most basic simulates the mammalian reflex of sucking and draws unwanted agents to the surface; plucking or pinching is a way of squeezing out an offending intrusion; and dietary change, or the adjustment of regular eating habits (sometimes with the addition of herbs) is a behavioural trait instinctive to “higher” animals.

In most Vietnamese households, the mother or grandmother usually performs therapy, although no strict gender divide exists, thus making it not unusual for men to gladly take on the role of caregiver. It also happens that some individuals, be they female or male, develop a heightened curiosity and sensibility for healing and become adept practitioners who are sought out when there is a need for more specialist attention. Some from rural areas even head to the city, and examples of folk practice becoming professional craft include many of the practitioners in Ho Chi Minh City who peddle their bicycles down the side streets of a night-time and announce themselves to apartment dwellers by shaking a stick with a row of loosely attached bottle tops. “Come up to the third floor,” comes a shout, “and bring all your steaming herbs and cups!” At locations around town as well, from around midday until the early hours of the next day, others can be found on bustling street corners, or set up in a row along footpaths.<sup>3</sup> All it takes is a straw mat laid on the ground, with equipment ready to go. So while Roy Porter (1997:36) correctly describes folk medical practices as founded “upon coherent conceptions of the body and of nature that are rooted in rural society,” nowadays, even for urbanised Vietnamese, both in their homeland and throughout those countries where many from the south have found new homes since 1975 and the fall of Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), the juxtaposing reality (*considered by some*) remains that despite modern Western health care being increasingly accessible, they prefer and continue with treatment methods that they relate to and find effective. Findings from the World Health Organisation (Zhang, 2000:v) support this thesis on a broader platform: “The popular use of traditional medicine [*including folk medicine*] continues to expand globally and this pattern is not restricted to poor economic regions of the world, but includes

an increasing application in countries where biomedicine or modern Western medicine is readily available.”

This became abundantly clear in Melbourne in 2002 when a new community health care centre was built in a heartland of a numerically strong Vietnamese constituency. When opened, it only took a short while for government agencies to realise it was being attended less than had been expected. When Vietnamese community leaders were questioned about this, they explained that many people treated their health concerns at home before seeking professional attention.

The way that folk practices are bound within the knit of social life is well described by Craig (2000:703), who writes that popular medical knowledge “exists in forms which lay people are able to remember, manipulate, and apply widely to manage their everyday lives”. Furthermore, “practical logics” are “formed by the demands of everyday household routine, and become embedded and embodied in the rhythms of daily life, and in the domains of wellbeing and relationships of responsibility that household carers construct and defend”. Sounding like a scholar with a foothold in the social sciences, the Venerable Phap Thang, who we met in *The Lantern* essay “Gua sha and the Buddhist forest monk medical tradition” (Vol. 12-2) remarked: “Southern people respond well to what they grow up with because they relate to it. It is a pity that professionals don’t acknowledge treatments that people can do for themselves; they think their medicine is stronger but our medicine from the south is also very effective and practical.”

### The family

In Vietnamese society, no other institution plays a more important function in the life of the individual than the family and the ancestral line. In this worldly setting, ethics, duty and responsibility are expected and meritorious virtues that construct harmonious relations in the present, ensure continuity into the future and foster on-going allegiance and comfort for the deceased. In contrast to its oft-cited emphasis on otherworldly affairs, the Abbot Thich Phoc Tan, of the Quan Minh Temple in Melbourne, informed me of a Buddhist tenet that regards the family as more important

than the individual in deciding the best course to take when a member is confronted with illness. Arthur Kleinman (1980:306), the prominent cross-cultural researcher and psychiatrist, further proposed: “It may appear strange to some to consider the family as a ‘practitioner’ ... but considering that 73 per cent of all sickness episodes are treated solely in the context of the family, there is nothing all that strange about looking upon the family as practitioner. Indeed, in most societies it would appear to be by far the most active form of clinical practice.” Other cross-cultural studies identify mothers and grandmothers as the most important health care providers of lay healing (Finerman, 1989: 25) and “most sources estimate 70 to 95 per cent of all health care is domestic—not professional—and women provide nearly 95 per cent of all domestic care” (Clark, 1998:159).

All naturalistic folk medical practices throughout the world share a number of defining characteristics. Some that are especially pertinent to the Vietnamese include:

■ Knowledge is transferred mostly by observation and practical instruction from one generation to the next,<sup>4</sup> in contrast to scholarly medical systems, which all have a formal written record and a classificatory index. Such information *may* in *some* cases be written down, but it *is* unpublished. As one interviewee put it, “There’s no need, people already know how to do it.” We may find as well that some folk medical knowledge such as recipes, formulas, practices and cooking instructions can be jealously guarded and stay the sole property of a particular family.

■ These practices are not usually carried out with any intention of financial gain. They are part of the sharing and helping exchange within the community. Favours or gifts however may sometimes be given in return.

■ The manner of learning about health, how illness comes about, the course of its detriment to the body and how it is best treated simply accrues, almost inconsequentially, as an integral part of the socialisation of the individual. There is commonly an element of contempt held for this process by those who have studied formal medicine and who may encourage (for their advantage) the notion that folk practices are devoid of merit and

should be avoided.

■ Therapeutic practices are like bequeathed family heirlooms. By acting upon recommendations and instructions, the ancestral line is reinforced and good fortune is fostered now and into the future.

■ It is deemed a duty for the older generation to pass on what they know to be important for the health and wellbeing of the next generation. In an interview in Melbourne, Mr Minh Tien explained, “The elderly like to stick with their culture and spread that way of thinking and going about things to the younger generation. Sometimes the young firstly adopt Western ways, but from around 30 years of age onwards they tend to go back and get to know their original culture.”

In 2002, I conducted a survey of 103 first-generation Vietnamese Australian students, comprising 62 females and 41 males aged 16 to 19, about their opinions on home-based treatments. Their responses indicated their attitude was very positive. Nearly every person had been treated at home by a parent, and 90 per cent found it was effective and desired to learn more. In other formal surveys and informal conversations I recorded, when asked, “Why do you prefer using folk medical methods?” replies such as, “it is a family tradition,” “they are effective,” “they are good for many illnesses, so a doctor is not necessary,” and “I like it because I can do it for myself and my family” were common. “They cost no money,” also featured, of course!

### Buddhism and medicine

Another major influence is Buddhism. Its diffusion along maritime trade routes from India to the shores of southern Vietnam, some time between 300 and 600 AD, guided the spread of medical ideas. Zysk (1991:6) expresses this eloquently: “Any understanding of the social history of Buddhism is incomplete without a full elucidation of Buddhism’s involvement in the healing arts.” To capture this jewel of the heart, the Venerable Thich Phuoc Tan found among the Buddhist sutras (“The Words of the Enlightened Ones”) numerous references to the virtues of medicine and kindly translated the following verses from Vietnamese. In the “Earth Store Bodhisattva Vow Sutra” (*Kinh Dia-Tang Bo Tat Bon*)<sup>5</sup> it

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## Ancient and universal

On September 15, 2015, news came of the discovery of a Bronze Age stone structure on the island of Westray, in the Orkney group off the coast of Scotland. Rod McCullagh, Deputy Head of Archaeology Strategy at Historic Scotland, said about the find: "This is a beautifully preserved site with lots of tantalising clues pointing to its use as an important building, central to the community who built it." He has good reason to believe it "may have been used as a sweat house for healing and cleansing..." because, "early analysis work suggests the building is likely to be a 'burnt mound', which generally comprises a fireplace, water tank and a pile of burnt stone. Through experimentation and reference to medieval Irish literature, experts have been able to deduce that stones were roasted on a hearth before being placed into the tank of water, bringing the water to a boiling point and producing lots of steam" ([www.historic-scotland.gov.uk](http://www.historic-scotland.gov.uk)). In a harsh windswept place like Westray 4000 years ago, one can only begin to imagine how much sanctuary and gladness the sauna gave. It is the latest in a series of related finds dotted throughout Scotland...

makes clear that: "To help in overcoming sickness gives the helper unfathomable merits." Likewise in "Rulebook for Bodhisattva Candidates" (*Kinh Pham-Vong*) it is revealed: "In the eight ways of earning merit, caring for the sick comes first," and in "Rules for Monks and Arhatship" (*Luat Tu-Phan*) we find the sublime communiqué: "It is better to make an offer of assistance to a sick person before an offering to the Buddha."

In discussion with Ms Hong Buu Lien in Melbourne, she said, "In Vietnam I spoke to some wandering monks (*sukhac thuc*) about steaming, because we all know they know a lot about it." I asked Phap Thang if he had seen monks in the forest doing herbal steaming. He replied, "Yes, they used their begging bowl to boil the herbs," and laughed. "A bowl can be used for many things: to cook food, boil water, make the steam sauna, the list goes on! They boil up herbs and place the steaming bowl on the ground, sit beside it and use their robes to cover themselves from head to toe."

### Health care and the temple

Throughout Asia many Buddhist temples operate as free traditional medical centres and herbal dispensaries. In Vietnam, "pagodas, as places of worship and community events, are natural places where health services are offered to the public. A feature of these pagoda-based clinics is the medicinal plant garden, which serves to educate the public about plants used for common illnesses" (Dung and Bodecker, 2001:401). In the south they often display a sign saying "Folk Medicine Clinic" (*Y Hoc Dan Gian*).

Treatments are performed by monks who have been trained either in formal colleges or by an apprenticeship to a master. They are often the only places where people can receive formal herbal treatment and acupuncture. But being busy places open seven days a week, and frequently seeing 200 to 300 people a day, has them, beyond exceptional circumstances, too pressed for time to be able to carry out practices such as herbal steaming, *cao gio* or cupping. This is well accepted however, since everyone knows a family member or neighbour who can do them. Nevertheless, herbal formulas are often given to people to take home and steam. It makes

perfect sense that the home be the ideal place to receive steaming, because following treatment it is not in the interests of the patient to venture outside when the skin pores are open and liable to be further penetrated by aggravating factors such as wind and other climatic effects.

Each temple maintains its dispensary of herbs in a variety of ways. From January to March each year, when the weather is dry, monk-herbalists often spend several weeks on gathering trips to the mountains and jungles. These herbs are then sorted, laid out to dry under the sun and put in bags and stored. Each temple also maintains a herb garden, which is important because in the southern and folk traditions, fresh herbs are always preferred to dried herbs. "Fresh herbs have something that the dry herbs lack, and although you can preserve some of the benefit by drying, it's still not the same," says Phap Thang, adding, "The only reason why we dry herbs is when they are not available close-by." Another proportion comes from local people who donate what they grow in their own gardens or find in nearby fields. People who live far away help by giving special herbs that grow in their surrounds to truck drivers who can pass by the temples and drop them off. In keeping with tradition, the Venerable Thich Phuoc Tan said, "the Communist government has encouraged people in the countryside to grow herbs in their gardens and city folk to grow them in pots at home, so they can have them on hand to treat themselves." In Melbourne too, many people grow herbs for this purpose.

### Poisonous wind as a cause of illness

George Foster, the founder of ethno-medicine, a sub-discipline of medical anthropology, described folk medical practices as based on "prevailing causality beliefs, which form the rationale for treatment" (Foster, 1983:21). This is entirely true of all the naturalistic Vietnamese folk therapies, and any discussion on southern and folk medicine falls short without highlighting the detrimental effects that wind has on the body. Its significance is explicit with steaming being regularly described as "causing sweating so the wind can get out". This helps explain why people enjoy herbal steaming and feel refreshed afterwards. The

steam causes a sweat, which in this case is called “poisonous water” because it contains wind, which has blocked the points at the surface, so afterwards you feel relaxed and at the same time more spirited and energetic. Other therapies spell out the same. *Cao gio* means “to scrape out the wind,” and plucking (*giat gio*) means “to pull out the wind”. There exists no specific word for a cupping mark, or for the marks produced by *cao gio*—they are manifestations of resolved illness or injury coming to the surface and are simply referred to as “wind”.

In professional northern school parlance, when wind (*phong*) causes pain or illness, it is described as *phong ta*, or “evil wind” (*xie feng*) in the same manner that its malevolent nature is described by both lay people and TCM professionals in China. In everyday southern Vietnamese speak however, it is called *gio doc* (pronounced “yaw,” as in “saw,” *doc*), which means “poisonous wind”. An esoteric discernment has “poisonous wind” as noxious, yet an entirely natural phenomenon, whereas “evil wind” conjures up religious connotations, as it associates with Buddhist ideas concerning karma and health. An evil wind problem occurs because of a preordained or karmic reason, and causes a person to suffer illness spontaneously and for no rational reason. This then is attributed to the mind and can be resolved only by paying homage to the Buddha. In the scheme of things, poisonous wind is superficial and transitory compared to evil wind, which can reside within the reincarnated mind and manifest in the body for many lifetimes. Alternatively, evil wind can be caused by harmful spirits and needs to be dealt with by exorcism or another shamanic recourse. This type of intervention is called *Thuoc Tay*.

For most Vietnamese, environmental poisonous wind is held to be the cause for a smorgasbord of health issues including common cold, influenza, muscle aches and spasms, and Bell’s palsy (to name a few). What is more, wind can enter the body and disrupt the regular equipoise of the wind (air) element, and disrupt the balance of the three others, being fire, water and earth. This excess of the wind element literally “opens the gates (pores)” to further illnesses. In southern folk medical thinking, for one to get sick requires the body to be already un-

der par. In this condition, the body’s regular exterior defence at the skin level is compromised in its ability to resist further incoming exogenous (mostly wind) influences. This is because when wind is in harmony with the three other elements, it can successfully coordinate the opening and closing of the skin pores. In a balanced healthy state, the balance between the macro (natural) world and the microcosm (inside the body) has the defensive skin level able to function at an optimal range of responsiveness.

When there is already too much wind present in the body, and particularly when it has become locked in for too long at a deep level, the inability of this protective opening and closing activity to function properly allows more wind (and other pathogenic factors) to enter easily and “bed down” with what is already an overabundance. When this situation occurs, people are prone to serious and sudden concerns such as stroke.

Evidence gleaned from surveys and questionnaires I conducted among Melbourne’s Vietnamese community revealed that a large proportion of respondents believed that wind caused illness. In response to the question, “Do you believe that poisonous wind can cause pain and illness?” posed to 325 Vietnamese people living in the western region of Melbourne, 73 per cent of respondents answered “yes,” and only 8 per cent replied “no” (Bentley, 2002). Not surprisingly, the exact same percentage of people who believed in the ability of wind to cause illness also thought that traditional therapies were effective against it.

Many Vietnamese also think that the climate being colder, windier and more liable to change quicker in Melbourne than it does in Vietnam means that folk practices are even more important here, and they opt to treat themselves more regularly than even when living in Vietnam. Mr Tai Cao, who is active in Vietnamese community affairs in Melbourne agrees: “Having the experience of living in a hot climate in Southern Vietnam, the older generations know that sweating is good for them. They stayed healthy and didn’t catch colds like they do here. That’s why the people I know use steaming (and *cao gio*) even more than back in Vietnam.” He added: “Sweating is known as a natural process to eliminate wind from the body.”



Phap Thang perusing the WHO book on Vietnamese medicinal herbs, with a pomelo in the foreground.



Behind Phap Thang is a young Bodhi tree growing beside a white statue of the wheel of karma. The Buddha sat under such a tree at the moment of his Enlightenment. Bodhi leaves can be added to steaming formulas to increase the strength of all herbs. (Photos taken by Bruce)

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### Structure, materials and practice

Nowadays the vast majority of people perform steaming by simply boiling herbs in a metal pot and covering themselves with a blanket. Yet it was not always quite this basic. As a boy growing up in the Mekong Delta, Phap Thang remembers sitting in his village sauna when he had a common cold. He stayed inside for 10 minutes, whereas the adults would stay inside for 15 to 20 minutes. “There were many throughout the south,” he said, “but sadly it seems almost all have disappeared over the past 40 to 50 years.” During his numerous visits back to Vietnam, he has often asked about them in the many villages he has called on, but has rarely discovered one. Villagers say, “we don’t have the time to build them any more. We just cover up with a blanket.” Just last month, Phap Thang returned from a month in Vietnam, and told me he happened to see from the window of his bus a couple of signs in villages telling people to stop by and enjoy a herbal sauna. He said it appeared they were offering a free service.

The frame for the Vietnamese village herbal sauna is constructed in the same way as the ubiquitous Southeast Asian village chicken coop, only bigger. It usually measures 1.5 metres wide and 1.2 to 1.4 metres in height, and can accommodate four people in one sitting. Interlaced strips of bamboo are woven into a dome shaped structure and covered with hardy coconut palm leaves. An opening is cut, so once inside the occupant can reach out, receive a pot of steaming herbs and pull the leaves across to keep the steam from escaping.

Coconut leaves can last for about five years before needing to be replaced. These leaves are held firmly in place by threading thin strips of twine made from coconut bark. Some houses in the south are still constructed with a support weave of twine that comes from this versatile tree.

Some saunas are fitted with a bamboo pipe connecting a pot of boiling herbs outside the sauna to the inside, as described in “The Thai herbal sauna” (Bentley, 2015:22). Vietnam has an ancient clay pot-making tradition. As a boy Phap Thang remembers large pots with curved sides and a lid, with a specially designed hole made about three quarters the way up on the side. A hollowed out bamboo

pipe (30 to 75 cm wide) was inserted into this circular opening and connected to the sauna. If the bamboo was thinner than the size of this hole, then clay reinforced with dried shavings, cut from the base of a rice plant, were mixed together and packed to fill the gap. It took only 24 hours for it to set and hold tight. The rice shavings bound the clay in the way lime helps to make cement. The pot was supported above a fire on a metal tripod.

With lament, Phap Thang remarked, “These days, most people take the simpler and easier steaming option.” Herbs are boiled in a large pot for 15-20 minutes to release their properties. The person then disrobes and sits on a small stool beside the pot, covering up with a blanket. Inside this canopy, the lid of the pot is carefully opened to allow a sufficient amount of steam to escape and permeate this closed-in area. Care needs to be taken in case the lid is released too quickly, otherwise the heat of the steam or the fragrance of the mixture can be overwhelming. He said his mother taught him that the safe way to control the amount of steam released was to place his hand over the edge of the pot and slowly open it a little: “If the steam is too fierce, it will scald your hand and certainly bother the body. So wait a little while and try again.” Accordingly, if the sauna becomes too hot or the aroma overbearing, it is easy enough to leave the sauna or poke one’s head out to dilute the atmosphere and take a “breather”.

It is important that once a slight sweat has been achieved, it is time to cease treatment. Copious sweating is ruled out, because this only drains the body, whereas a light sweat is enough to open the pores and push out the surface pathogen. In addition, steaming is usually performed only once, or possibly again the next day. It should be done as soon as the person feels unwell and when a pathogen, such as wind, is still at the surface. If a longer period of time goes by before steaming, the success will be reduced because the wind has been given time to penetrate deeper.

This does not mean, however, that steaming is contraindicated. It still has the benefit of clearing the breathing passages and making the person feel relaxed. Once completed the patient immediately dries off. They can take a warm shower six to eight hours later. Cold water is never an option at any stage of illness.

### Inherent benefits of herbal steaming

As an experience, herbal steaming is enjoyed for the pleasure and comfort it brings. The heat of the steam is calming, and united with herbal actives delivers a swift medicinal effect. “I like steaming because it cleans my body and makes me feel refreshed,” said one interviewee in Melbourne. This is because steam causes the skin pores to open, which stimulates the body to go into an excretory mode and thereby facilitates the removal of wastes and toxins. As David Craig (2002:118) describes, “Steam baths are primarily purgative; pathogens follow sweat out of the body, and relief follows.”

A sweat fulfills a basic tenet in traditional medical thinking by eliminating pathogenic factors such as wind and water from the body. The choice of one therapeutic method over another is based on which is considered best equipped to meet the requirements for a cure... in principle. I do know that many people simply prefer herbal steaming because it feels good. So besides being comfortable and a unique way of bringing the value of herbs into the body and to cause a therapeutic sweat, what else is unique about herbal steaming?

Herbal steaming is ideal especially when the entire body needs treatment. It is a complete treatment that penetrates into every nook and cranny at the same time in equal proportion; unlike cupping or *cao gio*, for example, which have difficulty getting into certain sites to treat various problems including rheumatic pain locked in between bones.<sup>6</sup> Steaming has no such problem. Even a poultice or herbal rub applied to a pain or injury site has its effect concentrated at that region only, whereas herbal steaming can infiltrate the surface geography of the entire body. Steaming can therefore relieve both generalised and specific muscle aches and body fatigue. Steaming is considered especially beneficial for wind conditions because, like wind, it is not fixed and has the nature of moving around and diffusing in all directions.

In an interview in Melbourne with Mrs Ut Em Thi Tran, aged 51, she recommended steaming for any whole body condition, including tiredness, fatigue, muscle aches, common cold, flu and “when everything feels stressed and causes a headache”. She said, “Anglo-Australians can relate to a similar

therapy, by leaning over a bowl of mentholated *Vicks* vapour rub mixed with hot water and breathing in the vapours to clear the nose and chest. We Vietnamese use herbs. The beneficial effects of the vapours from steaming are taken into the body via the nose, mouth, hair and by all the skin.”

In addition, and most profoundly, by giving the body a complete treatment pays credit to the principle held by all natural therapies that the body has an innate intelligence, and helped along by a positive stimulus can regain its own strength and be able, in its own dynamic way, to rectify those places that need attention. This positive way of understanding healing is implicit in the purpose of steaming. Phap Thang remarked, “The body has a way of letting the steam know where it has a problem because during treatment the areas of discomfort give a special feeling of relief. This is the *xong hoi* way.” Steaming has the capacity to bolster the body’s intelligence to act in ways that not even the best therapist can fathom. It is a beautiful philosophy made even better because it works.

### North vs South steaming practices

First, the herbs used in southern folk steaming mostly derive locally, compared with those used from the *materia medicas* of the northern and southern schools. Second, whereas a scale is used to measure the chosen herbs in a northern school formula, in the southern school and in folk practice, quantities of herbs are measured by feel. Practitioners gather up a certain amount and deliberate its weight in the hand. Phap Thang said his father had a meticulous sense for measuring precisely how much any given herb was needed, either when making an internal prescription to drink or when constructing a steaming preparation. Granted it may not be “scientific” but certainly it is a refined art. “I always lost out when I tested to see if he got his weighing right. He’d feel for a quantity and then I’d weigh it see if he got it right,” said a disappointed Phap Thang. Thirdly, whereas many roots are found in both northern and southern school formulas in the north of the country, they are, as a rule, excluded from prescriptions in the regional south due to the influence exerted by Theravada Buddhism, which most southerners follow, whereas in the north, Mahayana Buddhism holds sway.

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Galangal



Lemongrass



Round Zedory

According to Theravada principles, the roots of a plant or tree should not be cut, and if so only in dire circumstances as it will either die or its survival be threatened. For this reason, only leaves and rhizomes are regularly used in southern folk formulas. However, when a condition is serious and requires roots, then it is acceptable to use them, although the person doing the digging should spare a thought for the plant and ask its forgiveness. I pressed Phap Thang on this score, and he is convincing in his assurance that people in the south, not just monks, *do* indeed pay this type of tribute: “They know you need to care for all forms of life.” Even digging to get the nodes from rhizomes, such as turmeric, galangal, zedory and ginger, is done with enough care to not jeopardise the plant. Among the recipes to come, you will note the word *La* in front of the Vietnamese name for many herbs. *La* means leaf.

#### Contraindications, safety measures

As the World Health Organisation (2000:1) testifies: “Long historical use of many practices of traditional medicine, including experience passed on from generation to generation, has demonstrated the safety and efficiency of traditional medicine.” However the correct choice of herbs to treat an individual condition is paramount to success. The guidelines given in “The Thai herbal sauna” similarly apply to this Vietnamese follow-on. They were: “Do not enter the herbal sauna if the following applies: during pregnancy, fever, hypo- or hyper-tension or heart disease. The herbal sauna is also not recommended for hot body conditions or for those with fiery temperaments (excess fire element). Allow the body to dry off in the sun or rub dry with a towel after a few minutes, and sit and relax for a while. Be sure to drink plenty of water (not chilled) afterwards.”

As well, observe these extra conditions:

- Steaming therapy is not called for if the body is already perspiring.
- If scalded, immediately douse with cold running water. The basic first-aid treatment that Vietnamese people employ is to apply a cold towel with ice over the affected area. Another popular method is to cut a portion of fresh aloe vera and apply the clear inner gel directly.

Another effective measure is to mash the root of the kudzu vine (*san day*) and mix with a little warm water to turn into a paste. Put the paste on some material and allow contact to the scald or burn for half an hour before removing. Perform twice daily for two to three days. Kudzu vine is cold, relieves pain and helps the skin recover. If more serious, seek medical attention.

#### The plants used

In the north the climate is subtropical, whereas in the south it is hot all year round and divided between dry(ish) hot and rainy humid hot. In the Mekong Delta, this abundance of heat and a plentiful water supply makes for a rich and varied pharmacopeia. From here on a map, if we were to track westward, we intersect with the southern thin strip of Thailand, and further on southern-most India and Sri Lanka. Interestingly, yet to be expected, many herbs used in the Thai herbal sauna and herbal compress (see *The Lantern*, Vol.12-3) are also found in Vietnamese steaming practices.

To determine the correlations between herbs growing in Thailand and Vietnam, I presented Phap Thang<sup>7</sup> with the page-by-page challenge of identifying what grows in Vietnam with what appears in the book *Medicinal Plants of Thailand (Volume 1)* by Saralamp, Chuakul, Tamsirirkkul and Clayton (1996). Each of the 189 plants tabled had a clear colour photograph of the complete specimen, with additional close-up shots of the leaf, flower and fruit or berry, as well as a concise description of its pharmacologically assessed medicinal value. Phap Thang identified 135 to be growing in southern Vietnam. He was unsure about six varieties.

#### Nine commonly used herbs in Vietnamese steaming

**Galangal** *Alpinia galangal* (L.) Willd. (Viet: *Rieng*/ Ch: *Da Gao Liang Jiang*)

Used post-partum by steaming the lower half of the body (to be explained). Is a neutral temperature and rebuilds the blood after childbirth. Grows wild in the mountains and is also cultivated.

**Lemongrass** *Cymbopogon citratus* (DC.) Stapf (Viet: *La Sa*/Ch: *Xiang Mao*)

Aromatic, refreshing and relaxing, lemongrass is warming and benefits wind-

Illustration source: WHO, 1990.

cold conditions. Use in the sauna or as a steam inhalant by covering the head with a towel and leaning over a bowl. Breathe deeply through the nose for 15 minutes. For headaches and respiratory problems, to ease sore throat, reduce fever, to clear the nose, warm the lungs and alleviate acne, cellulite, and other skin problems. The finest lemongrass is cultivated in central Vietnam and exported to China. Grows like a weed in the south.

**Round Zedory** *Cucuma zedoria* (Berg.)

Rose. (Viet: *Nghe*)

Has the same benefits but is twice as strong as tumeric, making it the premier herb for women following childbirth. Used in steaming to tonify the blood, to strengthen the whole body and help rid the placenta from the womb. Zedory is not easy to find in the wild and is difficult to cultivate, making tumeric the more popular alternative.

**Pomelo** (including Grapefruit) *Citrus*

*Grandis* (L.) Osbeck (Viet: *Buoi*/ Ch: *Hua Ju Hong*)

Cooling, so improves wind-heat conditions including common cold and flu. Use the skin (green or yellow part, not the pith) and leaves. Use the heated young leaves to disperse blood stagnation and treat bruises. Widely cultivated as a domestic fruit.

**Mugwort (moxa leaf)** *Artemisia Vulgaris*

L. (Viet: *Ngai cuu*/ Ch: *Ai Ye*)

Its antispasmodic properties make it effective for treating muscle aches. Women can eat, drink and steam this herb after childbirth to warm the womb and the entire body. Use the dried leaves to smoke or steam either half or the whole body. Grows wild in the mountains and cultivated for medicinal reasons.

**Indian Mulberry** *Morinda Citrifolia* L.

(Viet: *Nhau*/Ch: *Yindu Sang*)

Has a warm thermal characteristic and treats wind-heat cold and flu. Relaxes a sore, heavy and painful body after hard physical work. The most important steaming herb to treat rheumatism. The dried leaves can be bought in Australia, but have 60 per cent of the potency of fresh leaves. The Vietnamese use the root and fruit and add vodka. They bottle, cover and place outside in the sun for one

week, and underground for another week to balance the sun and earth elements in order to use for hot or cold rheumatic types. Phap Thang advises: "When steaming or as a decoction, if necessary use the roots plus the leaves in an emergency to make the medicine stronger." The Vietnamese name then becomes *Re Nhau*. Drink 15-20 ml after dinner.

**Elsholtzia ciliata** (Thunb.) Hyland

(Viet: *Kinh Gioi*)

Used to treat headache caused by wind-cold. Helps alleviate itchy skin. The juice from the leaves can be crushed and applied topically to clear pimples. A prescription for steaming to cure skin conditions can include lemongrass and mugwort. *Medicinal plants of Vietnam* (WHO, 1989:169) notes: "The usual dose is 10 to 16g of dried plant in the form of a decoction, or 30g of the fresh plant in the form of juice. The vapour can be inhaled to treat influenza, sore throat, headache and measles."

**Tumeric** *Curcuma domestica* Valet. (Viet:

*Nghe*/ Ch: *Jiang Huang*)

The most used ingredient in the steam sauna or tent to tonify the blood and help rid the placenta from the womb. Also recommended to drink or eat. The rhizomes contain the pigment curcumin, an essential oil (WHO, 1989:131)

**Kumquat** *Citrus japonica* (Viet: *Quat*/

Ch: *Jin Ju*)

Use the leaves and peel for wind-cold conditions and to cleanse the skin. The peel is dried in the sun and has an antibacterial effect and is often steamed in the house to prevent the spread of illness.

In January 2000, I had the good fortune to meet Ms Nguyen Kim Chi, who owns a small art gallery in Ho Chi Minh City. We spent three afternoons talking about herbal steaming, and on the second occasion I found she had ordered a delivery of what she called a "menu of 14 of the most popular *xong hoi* herbs" (*la xong*) from the local market, just to satisfy my interest. She said this was "a whole list, and in any one treatment you may need to use only five or six herbs". Ms Kim also recommended adding one, or even better, three dessertspoons of white rice wine



Pomelo



Mugwort



Indian mulberry



Elsholtzia ciliata



Tumeric



Kumquat

once the boiling of a herbal brew is complete. “The wine helps getting the benefits of the herbs into the body,” she claimed, and instructed further: “Steam for 15 minutes. Any longer and the body can sweat too much and cause tiredness. Use a thick blanket. Dry off very quickly and go to bed, or put on warm clothes and stay inside—do not go outside. You can also drink other herbs before or after *xong hoi* to help promote a sweat; such as a glass of warm water with three slices of ginger.”

Ms Kim added, “After the communists took over there were no private doctors and no chemist shops. All the available drugs and medical equipment was assigned to government hospitals and a few clinics. If you were unwell you’d have to go and wait for hours before being seen. The time required was far too long, especially when there’s always work to be done! I believe that home based treatments like steaming, cupping and *cao gio* became even more popular because, besides being effective, they are so much more convenient. People were helping each other out by going to one another’s homes to do treatments.”

Below is Ms Kim’s steaming menu. The first eight herbs are available fresh in Melbourne at Vietnamese grocery stores. Unfortunately

many herbs that are used for steaming in southern Vietnam are unavailable in Australia. Using what can be grown or obtained outside Vietnam sometimes restricts steaming to more simple recipes.

I asked Phap Thang: “Why are some herbs good for either drinking, eating or steaming?” He replied, “With some, such as ginger and Indian mulberry, you can do all three, but generally you can’t eat steaming herbs because of their strong unpalatable volatile oils and/or their texture. Examples are lemongrass (although you can drink it), eucalyptus leaf, bamboo leaf, pomelo and other citrus rinds.” The Vietnamese are a tremendously industrious people and do not dismiss or throw away any part of a product that can be used to advantage.

There is a saying from the south: “If you only knew, there’s a herb nearby to cure you even when you’re dying” (*Anh chet tren cay thuoc ma anh khong bei*).

### Steaming recipes

There are many herbal steaming formulas to treat all kinds of health issues. Probably the quickest and easiest is to simply add a few drops of eucalyptus oil and menthol or green oil (*dauh xanh*, Ch: *yao shan*) to boiling water, cover the head with a towel, lean over

	Vietnamese	English	Functions
MS KIM'S STEAMING MENU	La Xa	Lemongrass	Clears nose, warms lungs, promotes sweating.
	La Buoi	Pomelo leaf or Grapefruit leaf	Benefits skin, promotes sweating.
	La Chanh	Lemon leaf	Clears the breathing passages, dispels wind.
	La Dong	Ginger leaf	Warms the stomach and assists digestion.
	La Lot (Ch: Bi Ba)	Lolot pepper	Dispels wind, eases muscular pain.
	La Ngai Cuu	Mugwort/ Moxa leaf	Dispels wind, warms lungs, stops pain and headache.
	La Thuoc Doi	(unknown)	Cools lungs, cools and cleanses the skin – good for pimples, psoriasis and itch.
	La Mau Con	(unknown)	Treats colds and flu, reduces fever, aids digestion.
	La Tan	(unknown)	Relieves sore throat, warms lungs and clears throat.
	La Bach Can	Eucalyptus leaf	Benefits lungs and blood, clears nasal passages, eases rheumatic pains, prevents wind entering body.
	La Sa Huyt	(unknown)	Improves circulation.
	La Tre (Ch: Zhu Ru)	Bamboo leaf	Cools the body, relieves heat caused by wind.
La Ngu Chao	(unknown)	Benefits circulation, relieves rheumatic pain.	



Ms Nguyen Kim Chi (left) at her Lan Chi Gallery in Ho Chi Minh City. Her assistant is sorting the steaming herbs brought from the market by the two women standing. They also brought some grapes as an afternoon snack. I had wandered into her shop the day before and was impressed by the art of Mr Duy Thai. With her help I managed to commission him to paint a series of six works on southern folk practices. His steaming painting is on the first page, and others have been featured before in previous *Lantern* cupping and gua sha essays. (Photo taken by Bruce.)

the bowl and inhale deeply through the nose for 10-15 minutes to clear the head and sinuses.

More popular and effective still is using fresh herbs based on traditional methods and prescriptions. These recipes range from simple to complex, depending on the availability of ingredients and the expertise of the person in charge. For identification and buying convenience, whenever possible (or necessary) I have listed herbs by their Vietnamese, Chinese, English and botanical names with recommended dosages.

#### Formula for wind-water

A basic recipe for eliminating moderate wind penetration causing cold symptoms, using fresh ingredients that are easily obtained:

These herbs open the bronchial passages, enter the lung points and diffuse into the lung organ. Feeling cold with low energy indicates a stronger wind presence and adding at least an extra handful of eucalyptus leaves is called for. The benefits of the volatile oils from eucalyptus leaves have been understood in Vietnam for many decades. It has a warming effect, so how the person is presenting will determine any appropriate changes. If a patient is already feeling hot, then use only one handful of eucalyptus and five handfuls of lemon leaves. Lemon leaves have cooling properties. If the body is very cold, then use five handfuls of eucalyptus, one handful of lemon leaves and one handful of bamboo leaves, which are also cooling. It is all about balance and harmo-

Common	Vietnamese	Measure	Function
Eucalyptus	<i>La khuyh diep</i>	2 handfuls of leaves	Clears the head and nose, benefits the lungs.
Lemongrass	<i>La xa</i>	1 handful	Clears the nose, warms the lungs and promotes sweating.
Lemon leaves	<i>La chanh</i>	1 handful	Clears the nasal passages and the throat.

“

Even when someone has sunstroke and headache, cold or icy water is not recommended because it freezes the points and tightens the head and causes more anxiety and ill feeling. Instead drink warm water, which opens and releases the points.

ny—just as it is in a well-constructed internal herbal formula. Too much heating, even when a cold condition dominates, can take the effect too far the other way, and vice versa.

When you happen to live in south eastern Victoria and ingredients are scarce, “you can still make do with eucalyptus (70 per cent) and lemon leaves (30 per cent),” said Mrs Phan An, when we spoke about steaming at her bakery shop in the township of Foster. “My family likes steaming and we use it for coughs and colds. I sometimes add a small fingernail knob of Vicks as well, but not so much, otherwise it is too strong.”

### A cooling prescription

Here is a simple steaming formula to cool down wind-heat (*gio nong*) syndromes when feeling flushed, hot and feverish. Even when treating this febrile condition, the best formula should be 70-80 per cent cooling.

English	Viet	Measure
Eucalyptus	<i>La khuynh diep</i>	1 handful
Bamboo leaf	<i>La tre</i>	1 handful
Lemon leaf	<i>La chanh</i>	1 handful
Tangerine peel	<i>Quit</i>	1 whole fruit
Ginger leaf	<i>La gong</i>	3-4 leaves

The tangerines grown in Vietnam are smaller than those cultivated in Australia, and have more oil in the skin and are therefore more aromatic. Ginger leaves are added to balance the formula, so it is not too cooling. The warming effect of ginger bulb (underground stem) is considered to be three times that of the leaves, but in most cases the leaves are powerful enough.

Ms Hong Luu Bien, who lives in Melbourne, recommended a similar formula made up of eucalyptus leaves, lemon leaves and the leaves and twigs of perilla (Viet: *Tia to*/Ch: *Zi Su Ye*), which has a neutral temperature and helps to increase energy.

### Treating sunstroke

Sunstroke is also in the *gio nong* category (as above) and is called sun-wind. The same herbs are used to treat this strikingly hot and confronting situation. Before entering the sauna or steam tent, drink a glass of water mixed with the juice of one full lemon and green tea. Steaming should last only five

minutes and be followed with plucking/pinching (*guit gio*) treatment to release the wind-heat from the face and back of the neck. In accordance with the essential premise of balance, even when a condition is very hot, it is prudent not to tilt the balance from one extreme to the other. The hot/cold herbal ratio should be around 30/70, to create a formula that is not *too* cooling. After steaming for sunstroke drink a glass of warm water with cooling lemon juice

As an aside, this explains why even on a hot day the Vietnamese prefer to drink warm water. When cold water enters the stomach, energy is required to bring the system back to a warm temperature. This process heats up the body internally, which is not the desired effect. Phap Thang wisely counsels: “Even when someone has sunstroke and headache, cold or icy water is not recommended because it freezes the points and tightens the head and causes more anxiety and ill feeling. Instead drink warm water, which opens and releases the points.”

### A warming formula for wind-cold

This condition is known as *gio lanh* and is produced by a rapid change in the temperature, or from swimming or being caught in the rain. The simple combination of the following can be very effective to promote a sweat at the first signs of a common cold with mild fever, stuffy nose, tight muscles and headache:

- Ginger (Viet: *Gung*; Ch: *Sheng Jiang*) 3-4 slices.
- Mugwort (*Ngai cuu*) 1 handful.
- Lemongrass (*La xa*) 1 handful.
- Kumquat (*Quat*). Use the dried peel of one fruit and a handful of leaves

### Treatment for wind-water

In addition to the recipe “A cooling prescription” (above), comprising eucalyptus, lemongrass, lemon and ginger leaves, add fresh lemon peel (one handful) and fresh pomelo or grapefruit peel (one handful) to create a new formula to treat a condition called wind/water (*cam mui*). The primary identifying symptom is a runny nose. Being caught in the rain and wind, or when wind (or any movement of air) affects the body, or when taking a shower can bring on this

condition. The other symptom is a feeling of cold inside with laboured breathing, possibly asthma. Just as wind can stiffen the muscles, when it enters the lungs it makes them hard and breathing difficult. Grapefruit, and or pomelo peel, is considered especially effective for dispelling wind, softening the lung tissue and opening the bronchi. To prepare this wind-water recipe, a handful of each ingredient is required. Place these in a pot and cover with 80 per cent more water. Boil for 15–20 minutes, then simmer for 10. This formula treats biomedically diagnosed common cold and asthma. Breathe in for 15–20 minutes.

### Steam-wind

In the tropical south, steam-wind (can be known as either *h'oi nong* or *h'oi doc*) is produced when rain strikes hot ground and steam rises and penetrates into the body. It is understood to be a variation of wind because the combination of rain and heat engenders a moving dynamic that acts as an instigator for a host of different maladies. Dominant symptoms include feelings of heaviness, tiredness, and lethargy with swollen painful joints that feel either hot or cold, depending on the pre-existent ruling temperature of the individual. In an interview in Melbourne with Mrs Ut Em Thi Tran, aged 51, she mentioned a saying "*H'oi-gio ra nguoi khoe*" which means, "When steam and wind are removed from the body the person recovers." A simple and effective formula consists of:

- Lemongrass, 1 handful
- Pomelo or grapefruit peel, 1 handful
- Mugwort, 1 handful

Add to one litre of boiling water and simmer for 10 minutes

### A warming recipe for rheumatism

For cold type conditions, steaming warming herbs are called for. Phap Thang believes that due to the colder climate, there is more rheumatism suffered by the Melbourne community than in Vietnam. To treat cold type rheumatism the following formula is recommended. It can also be used for recovery after childbirth.

- *Nhuc Moi Xong*, 3 handfuls.
- Indian Mulberry (*Nhau*), 2 handfuls.

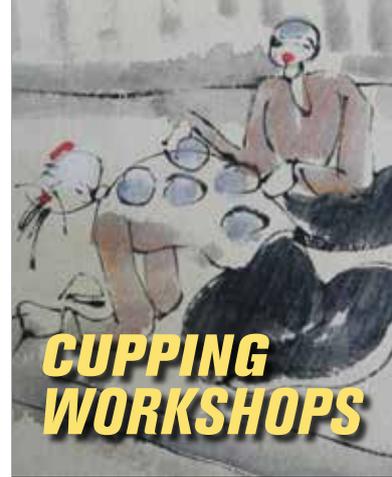
- *Bong Hoa Anh Dao*, 2 handfuls.
- Pomelo or dried Grapefruit peel (*Buoi*), 1 handful.
- Common Chinese arbor-vitae (*Trac ba*), 1 handful.

### Recipe for asthma relief

The following treatment plan can bring relief to asthma sufferers. The wind "floods" the lungs and reduces the air that can be taken in. Steaming has the action of opening the lungs and relaxing the breathing passages, stimulating respiratory function and freeing up the back by relieving tightness. "It works like a spray without the chemicals," said Phap Thang. Before the herbal sauna, his forest monk master taught him to apply moxibustion to four points on the upper back between the shoulder blades. They have unspecified folk Vietnamese or forest monk names but on close inspection correlate precisely to the locations of the Chinese acupuncture points *Fei Shu* (BL-13) and *Gaohuang* (BL-43).

The way he explained the actions of these two points was similar to Chinese accounts of their therapeutic action. *Gaohuang* was noted for its strengthening effect on a weakened immune system, and by burning moxa to these points, the coldness that produces tension and tightness is eased. Each point should be treated bilaterally for a maximum of three minutes. "Then proceed with the sauna to sweat out the poisonous wind that makes it difficult to breath. This treatment should bring very good relief and have a lasting effect." One should not stay in the sauna for longer than seven to 10 minutes. The basic prescription consists of the herbs that made up the previous wind-water formula, consisting of one handful of each of the following:

- Eucalyptus leaves
- Lemongrass
- Lemon leaves
- Fresh lemon peel from 1 fruit
- Fresh pomelo or grapefruit peel from one or both fruits
- Indian Mulberry (*Nhau*) to warm and strengthen the body
- Field mint (Viet: *Bac ha*; Ch: *Bo He*) to decongest and clear the eyes, nose and breathing passages.



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Honeysuckle by itself is a valuable steaming herb as it really helps the blood circulation by its action of cleaning and fortifying. Use the raw leaves.

Ms Nguyen Kim Chi suggested a formula for asthma sufferers from her previously listed herbs (see “Ms Kim’s steaming menu” above). These are lemongrass (*la xa*), pomelo or grapefruit leaves (*la buoi*), lemon leaves (*la chahn*) and mugwort (*la ngai cuu*). Her directions are for the patient to lean over a bowl of hot steaming herbs but *not* to cover the head with any material. Instead keep the face “open” above the steam for two or three breaths. Then turn away from the steam to take in a couple of breaths of regular air before taking another two to three breaths of the medicated steam. Continue this course of action until relief is gained.

#### Steaming to clear menstrual clots

The single herb Indian Mulberry (*Re Nhao*) can be used to remove clots (called blood poison), or it can be combined with Galangal (*Rieng*). The patient sits on a chair with an opening in the seat to allow the steam to rise up and enter the vagina. She is covered with a blanket, 360 degrees from the waist down to the floor. For optimum results, perform once or twice a week for three months. The Indian Mulberry leaves are used in southern steaming and though not as strong as the nodes or bulb are still effective. When a formula recommends the root or underground stem nodes to be used in a formula for a stronger effect, the genus name includes the prefix *re*: thus the stipulation for *Re Nhao* (Indian mulberry) indicates the bulb. Use three handfuls to one litre of water. Steam for 15-20 minutes. Do once every three days.

*Re Nhao* can also be dried and used like moxa. For the root, *Ba Ji Tian* (*Morinda officinalis Radix*<sup>a</sup>) can be purchased at Chinese herb shops.

#### Steaming and post-partum recovery

Traditional health care continues to play a vital role in post childbirth rehabilitation for most Vietnamese mothers. Notions of hot and cold are considered to be thoroughly credible explanations for the changes that take effect. Everyone in each family including grandparents takes the need to nourish and

restore warmth and balance to her body very seriously and families lovingly prepare herbal soups and decoctions. Cold drinks and food after childbirth are prohibited.

Nowadays, the practice of herbal steaming is less common, but still important for many. The loss of blood and the energy expended in childbirth means the body is cold afterwards, and the herbal sauna is one of the avenues to a complete recovery. A recommended formula consists of:

- Indian Mulberry *Re nhau/ Yin Du Sang*, 3 handfuls
- Honeysuckle *Bong hoa anh dao/ Jin Yin Hua*, 2 handfuls
- Common Chinese arbor-vitae *Trac ba/ Bai Zi Ren*, 2 handfuls

This formula builds blood and promotes the circulation, and cleans and nourishes the whole body. Fresh is best. According to the WHO book *Medicinal Plants in Viet Nam* (1989:67), “The leaves and fruits [of the arbor-vitae] contain an essential oil, consisting of L-borneol, bornyl acetate,  $\alpha$ -thujone, camphor and sesquiterpene alcohol.”

Perform for 10-15 minutes, three times a week for one to three months. To begin with, the number of times per week depends on whether or not it is comfortable for her to be seated

“Honeysuckle by itself is a valuable steaming herb,” says Phap Thang, “as it really helps the blood circulation by its action of cleaning and fortifying. Use the raw leaves. Do every second day for around seven times. Starting with three times per week if it is comfortable.”

#### Steaming (or Smoking) lower body

To clear away post-partum blood from the womb either steaming or smoking methods can be performed. To achieve smoking the body place dried herbs on burning charcoal.

■ Zedoary (*Nghe den*) Warms the body and removes the placenta and clots from the womb. Stops vomiting and replenishes new blood. Slice up or mash two nodes.

■ Tumeric (*Nghe vang*) Warms the body and removes the placenta and clots from the womb. Use two nodes.

Tumeric is considered the most valuable

a. The root of *Morinda Citrifolia* L. is mentioned as being similar to *Morinda officinalis* How. in the *Zhong Yao Da Ci Dian*, Jiangsu Science and Technology Press, 1977, p. 507.

herb to drink after childbirth to build and nourish the blood. Prepare by cutting four or five slices of the raw rhizome, pour on boiling water and leave to steep with a cover on a mug for 5-10 minutes. Drink two or three times daily for three months. If only the powdered herb is available, drink one teaspoon in a cup of warm water morning and night.

#### *Formula to clean the body and restore the strength after childbirth*

- Galangal (*Rieng*) Decongests the blood and warms the body. Measure: 1 handful
- Mugwort (*Ngai cuu*) Cleans and deodorises the womb, warms body. Measure: 1 handful
- Tangerine (Viet: *Quit*/Ch: *Gan ju*) Warms the body. Measure: peel from 1 fruit

The benefits of mugwort can be administered by steaming, smoking, drinking or eating. The lower half of the body can be smoked by putting burning charcoal in a tin bucket and adding it dry.

Another supplementary practice still evident in Vietnam is a smoke treatment called *Nam Lua*, meaning “to lie down by the heat/fire”. This requires the woman staying indoors and heating her body while resting and sleeping on a slatted wood bed base with a tray of smouldering wood and dried herbs mugwort, dried galangal, field mint and sliced pomegranate (to clean and protect external wind and rid the body of internal poisonous wind) underneath for seven to 10 days or even longer, like in the old days (up to 100 days).

#### Herbal steaming pep-up with vodka

Try this when feeling tired, fatigued or to chase away those few bluesy days post influenza and common cold:

- Lemongrass (*La sa*), 1 handful.
- Pomelo or grapefruit (or both), 1 handful.
- Vodka 150 ml (3 large Australian shots).

Mix with 15 litres of boiling water and boil for 10 minutes. Steam for 10 minutes either in a sauna or by being covered with a blanket (tent method). Afterwards, pour the fluid over the body and towel dry. You'll feel relaxed with more energy.

#### The steam bamboo method

The vacuum required to perform cupping can be achieved using steam instead of a flame. Although I have not seen this practice performed in Vietnam, informants have said that it was common in market places some 40 years ago. It is known as the “steam bamboo method” (*giac ho'i ong tre*), and is effective in treating headache, tired eyes and Bell's palsy. It is performed in Vietnam and China by hill tribes like the Hmong spread throughout the mountainous region between China and Thailand, Laos and Vietnam. It involves boiling bamboo cups in a herbal mix. The herb-impregnated steam is captured in the culm walls as well as steam causing negative pressure (vacuum) within the empty space of the cupping vessel itself. Instructions:

- Boil the bamboo cups in water or in a herbal formula for 15 minutes until the cup is very hot.
- Take out and shake off the liquid.
- Rub the cup rapidly in the hands for a few seconds to get rid of any liquid and to cool down the lip and outside surface, while keeping the interior of the cup hot.
- Quickly apply. The negative pressure still active within the cup will adhere it to the flesh.

The original commentary accompanying this photograph (below), taken in 1962, describes a “Present day Sino-Vietnamese pharmacy which will often include among its remedies the application of cupping vessels made of bamboo” (Huard, P and Wong, M. 1968:105). It was probably taken in a marketplace in northern Vietnam, and we see a young woman applying long black bamboo cupping vessels that she has plucked from the two pots filled with hot water.



## Endnotes

1. During the 12 months allocated to the *Folk medical practices in the Vietnamese community* project, one major opportunity to gather information from a broad cross-section of people happened on the day of the Vietnamese New Year celebration at the Quang Ming Temple, Australia's biggest Vietnamese Buddhist temple, in the Melbourne suburb of Braybrook. With the help of some interested Vietnamese assistants, we distributed and a questionnaire written in English and Vietnamese to 376 people. For most questions people were required to tick an appropriate box or write brief thoughts. The intention was to get information about their interest in folk medical practices and their level of personal engagement in the six most common folk medical practices, being steam therapy, cupping, *cao gio*, diet, plucking and massage. To the question: "Which therapy do you prefer to use at the first sign of feeling unwell?" all six were featured plus two additional options, being "Western medicine" and "None of the above", with room to comment on a line below. The most perplexing result I discovered when collating the answers to this question was that not one person ticked the box related to dietary change. I pondered why? During the formal and informal discussions I had with many Vietnamese people in the months leading up Vietnamese New Year, most had a lot to say about the bearing of good eating habits on health, and the need to make immediate adjustments at the first sign of feeling unwell. Far from me to be able to interpret this result, I consulted some members of the community, and even rang half a dozen of the survey participants, who had written their contact details as an option if I wanted to talk with them further. In every case I got the same reply: "Changing one's diet at the beginning of any illness is fundamental. It is so obvious that I felt it unnecessary to tick." It was such a lesson in the subtleties of putting together a successful cross-cultural survey, although importantly, as an alternative exercise to only collating the "hard" data gathered on the day, venturing outside the formal confines of the survey gave me the opportunity to realise a way of thinking that went beyond a certain "fact"—to gain a certain insight that no rigid survey could adequately discover.

2. In the broader context of Vietnamese health, it is significant to note that statistics on life expectancy among different migrant communities presented by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2001) show that Vietnamese immigrants are likely to live the longest, with the men likely to reach more than 86 years of age, compared with just over 77 years for Australian-born males. And Vietnamese women immigrants can expect to live more than 88 years compared with 82.5 years for Australian-born women. A research report by the School of Behaviour and Community Health Sciences at the University of Sydney titled "An investigation of health behaviour change in Vietnamese-born individuals living in Sydney, Australia" (Brock, K. Lockwood. E. Cant, B.R. and

Tran-Dinh. H. 2001:1) found that people who had lived longer in Australia had begun to eat more take-away type foods. This trend, it is posited, alters the advantages of a more traditional diet maintained by older members of the community and may lead to a reduction in life expectancy.

3. One night at 11pm, Phuoc Tan and I hailed a tricycle (*cyclo*) and went to a grimy, seedy part of Ho Chi Minh City to check out the nightly array of practitioners who set up their treatment mats, side by side along a street opposite a busy truck terminal. All the practitioners worked there until around 3 am. They were mostly doing cupping, massage and *cao gio*. Many of their clients were truck drivers who wandered across from the depot to receive treatment after finishing their "white knuckle" drive delivering goods from Hanoi. It was "seedy" from my point of view because it was apparent that without the companionship of the Abbot, whose distinctive coloured robes made his elevated ranking well known, I would have stood the chance of some unwanted interest from various people lurking around.

4. Anthropologists and others invariably describe the passing on of folk medical practices from one generation to the next as an "oral transmission". Yet in my experience this is overstated. Instead (and unfortunately) I would often rate what I have termed a "visual transmission" to be at least as common, and many people who have received such knowledge have agreed. Mention of this has often led to a smile and a knowing nod. So rather than the older generation taking the time to explain the practice as a preliminary course of action, the younger recipient is introduced to whatever practice it may be by seeing it being performed, often with very little or no virtually no accompanying verbal information or instruction. This watching a procedure may happen only a few times before, let's say Grandma, decides that she needs treatment and says, "you've seen me doing this before, now it's your turn." I would also argue that this "slack" instruction, which certainly also happens with cupping and *cao gio*, is not up to scratch, and unfortunately has the (now) practitioner less than equipped to perform the practice safely and well. In this respect, besides being omitted and already marginalised by professional medicine, folk medical practice as a whole suffers. In the modern world, with more choices available, this brings on the likelihood of even more weakening of such practices, which should be performed safely, knowledgeably and effectively. Then they will be able to better stand on their merits now and long into the future.

5. In Mahayana Buddhism, becoming a Bodhisattva is the ultimate ambition for the aspiring devotee. A Bodhisattva forgoes entering the bliss of Nirvana until all other sentient beings have attained complete Buddhahood or, as the current Dalai Lama explains, "until even the blades of grass have become Buddhas".

6. There is a parallel with the common Vietnamese way of cupping out wind, although its effect is not as

■ It was a joy to be given so many opportunities to connect with the Vietnamese and their southern folk medicine. I am indebted to all those people who generously shared their knowledge, without whom this essay would have been an impossible task. They include the Venerable Phap Thang, the Venerable Abbot Thich Phuoc Tan OAM, Mr Tai Cao, Ms Hong Buu Lien, Mrs. Ut Em Thi Tran, and Mr Minh Tien in Melbourne; and in Vietnam, Ms Nguyen Kim Chi, Dr Truong Thin, the Venerable Thich Chi Thanh at the Linh Son Temple and Ms Nyugen Thi Hoa, who together with a group of exceptional souls provide people with folk medicine treatment, with all donations going to support a local orphanage.

exquisitely exhaustive as steaming. On my first trip to Vietnam in 1990 I remember being unimpressed about cups being put literally everywhere throughout the entire back. I thought, after being mainly exposed to Chinese cupping, that these practitioners didn't know specific points and this was a way of covering all bases. I called it "blanket cupping". Later I was informed that because wind is mischievous and moves around it can reside anywhere and is unlikely to be locked up only at specific points or conform to any body mapping. Covering the whole back with cups was the way to catch it and draw it to the surface. Having practised this method many times since, I thoroughly concur, and believe it to be especially effective. The physical demonstration of where the wind is dominant at the time of treatment will be demonstrated by a strong, dark cupping mark. In conversation with Ms Nguyen Pham in Ho Chi Minh City, she said: "I like to have my whole back covered with cups because it completely takes all the poisonous wind out. I also enjoy the feeling and it makes me feel relaxed." The Greeks, Poles, Lithuanians and Russians also frequently perform cupping in this manner. For a detailed description of a Vietnamese cupping practice to draw out wind refer to my chapter "Cupping's Folk Heritage: people in practice" in Ilkay Chirali's *Chinese Cupping Therapy* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed, 2014). Churchill Livingstone, China. Available: scholar.google.com.au and on Google Play Books.

7. Phap Thang was the ideal person to consult, having spent his boyhood growing up on a fruit farm in the Mekong Delta, and with his father deeply interested in herbal medicine. In January during the dry season each year, the two would trek into the mountains and collect leaves, barks, and various forms of lichen. In his teenage years he furthered his herbal knowledge with the monks at his local clinic, and when he was 15 years old he was chosen by the Venerable Gaic Minh, a learned wandering forest monk, to be his apprentice. Phap Thang also studied agriculture at university until his second year was interrupted for evermore by the war.

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■ In part three of this steamy series, some Chinese "steam bamboo method" formulas will be featured, along with other Chinese steam treatments.