

# □ Tibetan Healing Massage

[Narrator]: Welcome back. In this episode, we are joined once again by Dr. Nida Chenagtsang, Buddhist teacher, doctor of Tibetan Medicine, and author of "Tibetan Healing Massage." Dr. Nida reveals the Tibetan art of massage, details its unique characteristics, and shows its links to theories of typology and subtle energy. Dr. Nida explains the Tibetan idea of La energy and how it is best guarded, details acupuncture points and their proposed effects, and offers his perspectives on rethinking health and spirituality. Dr. Nida also gives a live demonstration of Tibetan external therapies, including massage, cupping, stick therapy, hot compress therapy, and more. So without further ado, Dr. Nida Chenagtsang.

[James]: Dr. Nida Chenagtsang, welcome back to the podcast.

[Dr Nida]: Thank you for having me again.

[James]: Well, in our last episode together, we discussed that you've published two new books with Sky Press. The first book, "The Foundations of Vajrayana," was about Ngāṅdro—the so-called preliminary practices of Vajrayana—but we learned in that episode that they're much more than what "preliminary" may imply. We had such a good time talking about that book that we decided to create a separate episode entirely for your book on healing massage, and that's what we're going to talk about today. The book is called "Tibetan Healing Massage: A Guide to Kunye and the External Therapies of Sowa Rigpa." So first of all, congratulations on the publication.

[Dr Nida]: Thank you. Thank you so much for having me back to talk about my new book. In English it's new, but in Tibetan it's old (laughs). I have here the Tibetan version. It was published in 2001; I wrote it in 1999. This is the original version, and it has been republished a few times. When I wrote this in Tibet, it wasn't so popular, but now it's very popular, so I'm very happy and proud of this book. And now, here is the new version in English. So yeah, I'm very happy to present Kunye—the Tibetan massage—and also other external therapies which go together with Kunye.

[James]: When many people think of Tibetan medicine, Sowa Rigpa, they often associate it with medicines—the special pills and other compounds that are so famous. But external therapies, I believe, are somewhat less well-known. To quote from the beginning of your book on Kunye: "Sowa Rigpa, traditional Tibetan

medicine, is very rich in external therapies. That is to say, practices which we could also call manual therapies or touch healing. And Kunye, Tibetan Massage, is one of the most outstanding external therapies, and the main external therapy of Sowa Rigpa." I wonder if you might say something about the role of external therapies generally and Kunye in particular in Sowa Rigpa.

[Dr Nida]: Yeah, in Sowa Rigpa we talk about four major methods of healing. Number one is diet, number two is lifestyle, and number three is medication. Everybody knows about medication, as you mentioned; Tibetan people and people worldwide, when they talk about Tibetan medicine, they talk about the pills, powders, decoctions, and herbal teas. Mostly we talk about intake herbs; those are the most important part of the treatment.

But as you mentioned earlier, the external therapies are very important. In the four methods—diet, lifestyle, herbal medications, and external therapies—each is crucial because healing doesn't only come from taking herbs. Healing can be done externally, especially through massage, cupping, and stick therapy. Kunye is the most important part. Every medical tradition has its massage forms: Ayurveda has Abhyanga, Chinese medicine has Tuina, and the Thai tradition has Thai massage. Similarly, in Tibetan medicine, we have Kunye.

There's another book called "Kumye," which is more like self-yoga or yoga healing. This one is called "Kunye" (without the 'm') and refers specifically to Tibetan massage. The word "Kunye" is composed of "Ku," meaning application (applying oil or herbal decoctions), "Nye," which means the actual massage (rubbing, kneading, pressing, and acupressure), and "Chi," which means removing the oils.

After the complete massage, we use Tsampa powder (barley powder) or a special herbal bath to remove the oils. In my original book, I created a "Kunye tree" showing the three main trunks: Ku, Nye, and Chi. Each trunk has different leaves representing detailed methods. Today, I will demonstrate some unique aspects of Kunye.

[James]: You mentioned that massage therapy is found in many healing traditions. I wonder if you might comment on what you see as the unique characteristics of Kunye compared to other massage therapies.

[Dr Nida]: Before I say that, I would like to show one of my teachers. Does he look like a massage therapist? (shows image) He was a great yogi, mantra healer, Tibetan doctor, and expert in external therapies. Ngakpa Thamyu Rinpoche, one of my teachers from Amdo. What I see as unique about Kunye is that it's a complete system. From the beginning, we have the "protection of energies." We use specific

"La" points (protection points) to guard the energy.

Then we start the application of oil. We don't use one standard oil for everyone; it depends on their typology. For someone with a "Lung" (Wind) pathology—people who are emotionally sensitive, with dry skin and cracking joints—Sowa Rigpa says the skin is a mirror of the mind and energy. Dry or rough skin is often connected to the emotional level triggered by Lung energy. For that, we use specific oils like sandalwood or mustard seed oil.

Some people have "Tripa" (Bile/Fire) nature; they are wild-natured and don't do well with too much oil. It can make them nauseous or distribute heat poorly. For them, we use cooling oils or even decoctions of vegetables if they don't like oil at all. Then there's the "Peken" (Phlegm) typology—water and earth type. They have smooth skin but may feel cold or have poor circulation. For them, we use warm oils to stimulate blood flow and generate heat.

This makes it very therapeutic. In the past, Tibetan Buddhist meditators and yogis staying in monasteries or caves often lacked exercise and had specific diets, which led to health challenges. Many Tibetan texts say if you have problems from over-meditating, you should resolve them with Kunye. Even if yogis in caves didn't have special oils, they loved Tsampa and butter. So Kunye was often done with simple butter or "Menmar" (medicinal butter).

As I mentioned, practitioners often do it themselves as self-therapy. Doctors use different methods—rubbing, kneading, tapping—according to the person's needs. The "Chi" part (removing the oil) is also interesting. Today, what I call a "luxury massage" might last two or three hours for deep relaxation and detox. We do Ku, then Nye, then Chi using barley powder. Rubbing the back or vertebrae with that powder is very relaxing.

I grew up in a nomadic tradition. When we were kids, our grandparents used to ask us to do "Tsempuru"—you take Tsampa with a little butter but no cheese (if you add cheese, it's for eating!). We would rub our grandparents' backs and fronts with it. It's a very simple and practical practice. Kunye can be a complete relaxation or focused on therapeutic reasons. The tree shows different leaves for different methods. Today, everyone is so busy and lacks time for self-care, but Kunye offers simple methods that are very effective in a short time. I should have called the book "The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel," because our number one wish is to relax, detox, and sleep better. One master said: "More people need a massage than meditation today."

[James]: Two more points before the demonstration. First, the word "La." In the book, you describe tying a string to certain fingers and toes to regulate "La." What is the significance of "La" and this tying of the string?

[Dr Nida]: In Tibetan tradition, "La" is mostly explained in spiritual terms. "La-jorwa" refers to deep traumas. Today we talk a lot about trauma; in Tibetan medicine, trauma affects not just the mind but the energy level called "La." That's why we have "La protection." Patients need to feel safe. The flow of La is different for men and women. We protect La on the ring fingers. It's interesting that in the West, this is called the "ring finger"â€”putting a ring there means controlling or guarding the good energies. So we put a ring or a string there so the person feels safe and doesn't lose energy or feel "attacked" during the massage.

Then we have "La Massage," which is very practical. It follows the lunar calendar: from the new moon, La starts at the big toe, reaches the head at the full moon, and goes back down to the feet by the end of the month. There are 30 points. We use Sanskrit vowel sounds (A, E, I, O, U) during the massage. It's a very gentle approach. The great scholar Ju Mipham mentioned La Massage in his medical books. I've discovered that once you heal the La energy, you heal traumas. This can't be done just by talking; we need gentle tactile methods or rituals.

[James]: And your institute's trainings?

[Dr Nida]: At the Sowa Rigpa Institute, we offer training in external therapies and Kunye. We have a one-year "Foundations of Sowa Rigpa" program. Combining medical study with manual therapy makes it "lighter" and more experiential. We are planning specific Kunye classes soon.

Now, let's look at the book. It has beautiful graphics explaining everything from typology to the Kunye tree. Acupressure on the vertebrae is vital, as are the special meridians. We also have "Do-nye"â€”stone massage. When I saw "California Hot Stone Massage," I thought it was interesting because the origin might be Tibetan! We use silver rings for La protection, apply oil, and then demonstrate supportive therapies like hot/cold compresses, cupping, and moxibustion.

Now for the demonstration. We have Ku, Nye, and Chi. First, the warm oil. The temperature should be good. I've already done some cupping to relax the patient. Kunye combines well with any external therapy. Traditionally we use sheep's wool to warm the oil. We rub the oil gently with the thumbs, fingers, and palms, then go deeper with double palms or even the elbow for deep tissue work. In Tibetan, "Golujap-ruchu" means applying oil from the head to the toesâ€”a complete "Ku."

[James]: Many people use body lotion today; is that a form of Ku?

[Dr Nida]: Exactly, that's Ku. Lotions and oils are medicine. Then comes "Nye." "Nye" means "kneading," like kneading dough for bread or pasta. As a boy, I had to "tan the skins" of animals ("Pakpa-nyewa"), which is hard work. When I started Kunye, I realized it was the same word! My teacher, Dr. Jamyang LodrÃ¶, was an amazing doctor and expert in external therapies. He taught me his family tradition from the Golok area. They used animal bones for a method similar to "Gua Sha." I promised him I would put his family tradition in my book.

Acupressure is also critical. We work on the vertebrae and specific points on the head, like "Changbu" (the crown point). It's a very important relaxing point for insomnia. We also have "HormÃ©" (Mongolian moxibustion), where we use small bags with various powdersâ€”nutmeg, clove, gingerâ€”dipped in hot oil and applied to specific points like the palms and soles. HormÃ© is like a "short version" of Kunye for those who can't receive a full massage.

My book also explains Tibetan cupping using copper cups, which is the best medicine for the lungs. And there's "Yukcho"â€”stick therapy. This was a "Terma" (hidden treasure) tradition from the Dakini Yeshe Tsogyal and Guru Rinpoche, passed down orally and then written by masters. We use a wooden stick to tap around blocked areas to release tension. Today it's very popular among Tibetan doctors. When we do these therapies, we often use the mantra syllable "RAM."

Looking at the patient, I can see some areas under the cups are becoming red. This indicates internalized stress or angerâ€”what we call "high Tripa" (high bile). The cupping helps release that heat. The "tapping" part helps unblock the blockages. I always combine that with Kunye. Three to five minutes of tapping at the end, and everyone falls asleep. That's the best sign that the massage worked!

Lastly, "Chi"â€”removing the oil. If someone wants to lose weight, we use chickpea powder. For this patient, since he has a "fire" nature, it's better not to leave oil on the skin, so the powder helps remove it. Oil is relaxing, while the powder is rougher and more detoxifying. Finally, a shower at the right temperature completes it. Tibetan medicine balances hot and cold.

[James]: What disorders can Kunye address?

[Dr Nida]: It's a great painkiller and excellent for stress management. Sowa Rigpa describes 64 types of Wind (Lung) disorders, and most can be rebalanced with Kunye. This includes anxiety, digestion issues, joint problems, and muscle issues. In some cases, manual therapy is even better than herbal medicine. We are

conditioned to think we always have to \*take\* something, but sometimes we need to rethink health through external therapies like massage or herbal baths (the "Five Nectars").

Today's sedentary lifestyle is a major problem, even for "spiritual" people who sit for hours to meditate or chant. We need joint exercises and muscle movement. Even for digestion, instead of just eating more supplements, we need external work on the abdominal area—self-massage, compresses, or cupping. Receiving a massage once a month is not enough; once a week is better, and doing 5-10 minutes of self-massage every day should be part of our lifestyle.

[James]: Thank you very much, Dr. Nida. "Tibetan Healing Massage: A Guide to Kunye and the External Therapies of Sowa Rigpa," Sky Press.

[Dr Nida]: Thank you. "Sowa Rigpa in the palm" is what the massage is. Thank you so much.

[Narrator]: Thank you for listening to another Guru Viking podcast. For more interviews, visit [www.guruviking.com](http://www.guruviking.com).