



ASCENDING AND DESCENDING IN HERBAL MEDICINE

An Interview with Heiner Fruehauf, PhD

PART 1

Heiner Fruehauf, PhD, sat down recently with his long-time student and colleague at National University of Natural Medicine, Bob Quinn, DAOM, to discuss ascending and descending functions in the body. While on the surface a seemingly simple topic, it is in reality crucial to understand the up-down movement dynamic if one is to practice herbal medicine effectively.

QUINN: Heiner, I want to thank you for making the time to chat about this topic. It has been a few years, I think, since we have done one of these interviews and then published an edited version. As with the other interviews my hope is that as you help me to look at this topic more closely, others who read this will also be helped, and that their patients will then benefit. The feedback I have received about the other interviews has been very positive and I am grateful for that.

I have wanted to talk about qi circulation with you for some time. I think it is especially due to my continued work with chronic Lyme patients in my private practice and on my shifts here at NUNM. At first I thought we could provocatively call this interview “Up and Down,” but then settled on the more standard phrasing of “ascending and descending.” In short, I have never treated a single chronic Lyme patient where this issue does not play a key role. Every single one of them has tragically tight necks and upper backs, and I really mean 100% of them. But they also have a deficient lower *jiao*. The lower abdomen might at first report as tight and congested, but once that congestion is cleared, the deficiency shows through. Many of these patients also have terrible headaches. Virtually all of them have anxiety to one degree or another, often quite debilitating. These three symptoms, it appears to me, share the common thread of being ascending

phenomena—that is, qi moving up that cannot then cycle back down. It gets trapped above, either in the chest in the case of anxiety, at the neck in cases of neck pain and tension, and in the head in the case of headaches. I could list more symptoms, but I think you get the picture. We say in English: *What goes up, must come down*, but for these patients the qi seems to not come back down without our help.

In our interview on the Fire Spirit (*huoshen pai*) approach, I think we touched on an idea that can explain this: As *mingmen* weakens, the lower “root” can no longer anchor the body’s healthy heat below, and it then follows the nature of heat and rises in the body. Perhaps first it causes digestive complaints when it reaches the middle *jiao*, and then as it rises further it harasses the Heart spirit, bringing anxiety, and then it can rise further still resulting in headaches, stiff neck and shoulders. I know in recent years you have brought into your herb thinking teachings from Wu Sheng’an, a master practitioner from Xi’an, China. As I understand his approach, it focuses largely on reasserting a healthy up-down dynamic in the patient through innovative herb combinations, many of which are not at all familiar to TCM practitioners (Dr. Wu did not come up through the standardized TCM college system, but apprenticed with classically trained 19th century masters).

Where I hope we go in this discussion is to tease out what we might call different types of ascending and descending. I think in your Classical Pearls line, for instance, one can find different formulas to deal with up and down movement, and these various formulas are often radically different one from another. So obviously it is not as simple a topic as one might think by looking at the phrase “up and down”.

HEINER: Good introduction to an interesting topic, Quinn! One could say that all disease in Chinese medicine comes down to an imbalance between yin and yang. There is a quote from the Ming dynasty scholar-physician Zhang Jingyue (1583-1640) I translated before that captures this principle:

When diagnosing and treating disease, we must first of all differentiate between yin and yang. This is simply the most important principle of medicine. If the physician correctly differentiates yin and yang, the treatment will never be accompanied by side effects.

So, when focusing on pathologies related to ascending and descending qi dynamics, we are really talking about yin and yang imbalances. As a young herbal practitioner, I thought that balancing yin and yang primarily meant to pay attention to the hot and cold nature of the herbs in a formula. For somebody trained in the classical *Shanghan lun* style of herbalism, my focus thus was to always safeguard the yang by including warming medicinals. In the words of Chen Xiuyuan (1753-1823), one of the most accomplished authors on that particular lineage in the Qing Dynasty: “If in doubt, always tonify the yang, and thereby make sure that the patient does not get harmed.” In contrast, much of modern TCM herbalism seems to have internalized the nature-phobic body image of Western medicine and imitated the methodology of antibiotics by favoring heat-clearing herbs such as Huanglian, Huangqin, Huangbai, Zhizi, and Dahuang. In China, you can buy these over-the-counter in extracted form, including pharmacologically refined Huangliansu (berberine sulfate), and use it instead of antibiotics when anything red or itchy appears. In Western herbalism, we see an equivalent to this sort of knee-jerk reaction in the prominent use of the cooling

herbs goldenseal or Oregon grape. They are just like antibiotics when considering their heat-clearing effect. Then there is the prominent use of yin tonics in modern Chinese herbalism, especially Dihuang (rehmannia)—another common violation of the classical mandate to safeguard the balance of yin and yang. I find that yin tonic herbs—which I use all the time, I want to be clear on that—have the capacity to act like steroids. Since autoimmune diseases are extremely common nowadays, we need to utilize these herbs, but most often as modifications to a base formula that first and foremost supports the yang qi. You will see this principle manifested in every formula of the Classical Pearl line of herbal products, which best reflects my own style of clinical practice. The yin tonic materials are added to control the drying effect of the yang tonic herbs. In addition, they help to “shut down” the body’s over-reactions that we generally refer to as autoimmune complications.

QUINN: And to this mix, where I have to say from having worked in your clinic you were already having notable success with tough cases, you added the teachings of Dr. Wu Sheng’an. Can you talk about him and this way of thinking?

HEINER: About five or six years ago I met Wu Sheng’an in Xi’an. He traces his herbal lineage back to the famous Spleen/Stomach expert Huang Yuanyu (1704-1758), better known under the pen name Huang Kunzai (Huang Who Stabilizes Like the Earth), a scholar-physician who lived during the Qing dynasty. He wrote 8-9 books about the importance of the earth element in the practice of Chinese medicine. Huang’s work, however, is not so much about the principle that everything comes from the earth and the consequential need to tonify the Spleen in the way of Li Dongyuan (1180-1251). Huang primarily stressed the importance of the middle burner as the central pivot around which all up and down movement in the body revolves. He reminded his contemporaries that all up and down imbalances in the body can be harmonized by restoring the upward momentum of the Spleen and the downward momentum of the Stomach. In other words, Dr. Wu learned to look at the concept of yin and yang in Chinese herbalism primarily from the

perspective of the body's up and down dynamics. From a temperature perspective, he prefers to use herbs that are neutral as well as bland, rather than spicy or pungent. Bland is the flavor that is most friendly to the Spleen. When our digestive system is acutely sick, we tend to crave bland foods. Shanyao is an example of a bland food grade herb that benefits the digestion. Dr. Wu is very specific—more than any other herbalist I have seen—when it comes to looking at his prescriptions from an up-down perspective; just like a poet looks at the words in his creation to see what realm the words transport you into. Dr. Wu, like a poet who chooses and reexamines every word for its exact role and place in a stanza, always double-checks his formulas to make sure there aren't any superfluous ingredients. It is as if he sees arrows next to each herb in a prescription—this one pointing up and that one pointing down. I found this approach extremely interesting and clinically very useful. I should add that another pertinent feature of Dr. Wu's up and down approach is his therapeutic focus on the Lung as the “prime minister” of the organ networks, which commands all qi movement in the body. I had expected his primary focus to be on the Spleen and Stomach, but although he acknowledges the middle *jiao* as the pivot of all energetic momentum in the body, Dr. Wu tends to often start treatment with the Lung in order to drive this central pivot the way he wants.

QUINN: And qi stagnation figures in this?

HEINER: Yes. Our colleague Volker Scheid, an anthropologist by training, recently wrote an excellent article on the oversimplification of Liver qi

stagnation in modern TCM diagnostics. Too many patients get diagnosed with Liver qi stagnation and are prescribed Xiaoyao San. From Dr. Wu's perspective, he looks at the Lung (rather than the Liver) as the primary driver of qi in the body. As a metal organ, the Lung is of course in charge of driving the qi down. Energy movement in his formulas, therefore, is not so much initiated by Liver herbs such as Xiangfuzi or Chaihu. In contrast, he prefers herbs like Zisuzi or Shegan or Xingren or Houpo or Banxia to help the qi of Lung and Stomach move down. As a result, all the qi in the body starts to move. I found this approach helpful, not just for situations that involve the Lungs in an obvious way, but in an extended sense.

QUINN: Can you give more details, for instance with Xingren, on how Dr. Wu might use it?

HEINER: Yes. Dr. Wu might use Xingren, not just for cough or sore throat as we see in many TCM formulas nowadays, but in a way that most of us are accustomed to using Xiangfuzi or Yanhusuo for qi stagnation. Xingren is bland and temperature neutral, and therefore friendly to the Spleen; practically a food-grade herb that is often used for making pudding in China, similar to almond meal in Western cooking. Dr. Wu thus frequently prescribes this herb for conditions involving qi stagnation, i.e. depression, lymphatic congestion, cancer, heart disease, menstrual pain, etc.

CONTINUED WITH PART 2