



ASCENDING AND DESCENDING IN HERBAL MEDICINE

An Interview with Heiner Fruehauf, PhD

PART 2

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: Can you contrast the effectiveness of this approach with what we might call the “Liver qi approach” you mentioned earlier.

HEINER: I have found that approaching qi stagnation via the Lung works faster. While the Lung is classified as a metal organ due to its primarily descending momentum, the Liver is a wood organ: its job is to move blood and fluids upwards against gravity.

QUINN: An ascending force.

HEINER: Yes, ascending from earth to Heaven; into the opposite direction, really. In modern urban industrialized settings, we primarily see conditions that require a rebalancing of the descending functions in the body, since most patients suffer from counterflow issues: acid reflux, high blood pressure, insomnia...

QUINN: Anxiety.

HEINER: Anxiety, absolutely; and dizziness, a symptom that seems to have become more prevalent in recent years. In addition, many skin diseases can also be interpreted as a kind of counterflow—toxins welling up to the surface instead of being discharged below. Constipation, naturally, is also a type of counterflow—something that is supposed to go

down and out is stuck and stays up instead. Lots of conditions can benefit from this approach.

QUINN: This use of Xingren is found in the four-herb formula I learned that was created by Dr. Wu and transmitted to me through you. I think this very unique remedy features in the Metal Pearls formula in the Classical Pearls line. Can you discuss this formula?

HEINER: Sure. The name of this remedy, which sprang directly from the “pivot” teachings of Huang Kunzai, is She Jie Xing Chong Tang: She for Shegan (belamcanda); Jie for Jiegeng (platycodon); Xing for Xingren (apricot seed); Chong means “worm” and here refers to Jiangcan (silk worm).

QUINN: Are these herbs set in stone, or is there room to substitute as needed?

HEINER: According to my own experience, changes can be made, such as exchanging Dilong—another “worm”—for Jiangcan. Overall, the design of the formula aims at motivating the movement of all bodily qi via the Lung: Shegan, Xingren, and Jiangcan strongly descend the qi, especially when combined, and thus foster the Lung’s primary (“metal”) function of distributing qi in downward motion. Jiegeng, on the other hand, supports the aspect of the Lung that is supposed to move up and out; the aspect that opens into the nose and governs

weiqi circulation in the skin layer. Together, they support all aspects of Lung function and associated qi movement in the body, with a primary focus on the Lung's downward "metal" momentum. While this remedy does not contain any laxatives, I have found that it works great for most cases of habitual constipation. And perhaps most importantly, this approach is most effective for Western patients who tend to depression, most often a manifestation of what we call *bei*—sadness, grief or loss—in the terminology of Chinese medicine. A diagnosis of "depression" is most often accompanied by a feeling of sadness and stuckness and the sensation of a weight on the chest—if this condition is mild, it will cause depression; if chronic and severe, it will lead to heart disease. When this kind of patient takes this remedy, the weight tends to lift, and rather quickly a sense of breath and freedom and openness returns. The diaphragm opens, and communication between the upper and lower burner commences—just as depicted by Hexagram 11 (Tai), perhaps the most graphic picture of Lung function in Chinese medicine, transmitted to us by the Han dynasty creators of a science that associated all bodily functions ("the microcosm") with cosmic energy movements ("the macrocosm"). From a Western medicine perspective, moreover, this remedy can be regarded as a great flusher of the lymph. Cancer is always the result of longstanding lymphatic congestion. Shegan, especially, is regarded as an anti-toxin and anti-cancer herb in the Chinese materia medica. I even use it for patients suffering from HIV/AIDS and Lyme disease. But the temperature of Shegan is cool, so it often needs to be modified for longer-term use.

QUINN: What would you add or replace it with?

HEINER: I often alternate or replace Shegan with Zisuzi, an herb that also stimulates downward momentum but is warm in temperature. Altogether it can be said that this four-herb formula demonstrates how yin and yang can be regulated from the primary perspective of the body's up and down movements. In the urban pressure cooker of modern times, we tend to drive ourselves to "do more, more, more, faster, faster, faster." If you think of yin and yang as two phases of the cycle of

movement—expand (yang) and contract (yin), and up (yang) and down (yin)—it becomes clear right away where the primary imbalance of modern life is. As creatures who tend to live in constantly buzzing and illuminated cityscapes, we know how to go up, how to expand, but we do not know how to reign in all of the energy we have drummed up, by directing it downward and inward again. Most of our patients have developed an aversion to going to sleep early, and no one is exactly elated at the suggestion of rest. We don't know how to rest, to contemplate and just be anymore, originally one of our most natural instincts. Instead, everyone feels compelled to be active all the time. Even when we are exhausted, we find ourselves watching TV or doing email. In contrast, the station of rest and being is the strength of the Eastern approach.

QUINN: Earlier you made brief mention of Li Dongyuan, who also had a focus on the Spleen/Stomach, not as a pivot in the sense you are describing here with Dr. Wu, but in a different way. Li favored Huangqi and Renshen, and I do not hear you mentioning those herbs. Can you contrast these two approaches a bit more?

HEINER: Li Dongyuan lived about 1,000 years ago, during an era punctuated by war, starvation and rampant epidemics—a chaotic historic environment that is portrayed, among other places, in the contemporary Netflix series *Marco Polo*. The sick people he encountered tended to show signs of depletion and prolapse of Spleen qi. In the tumultuous years following the breakup of the Song dynasty, ginseng and astragalus could give people the energy needed to carry on in times of privation. Astragalus, with its lifting action, was a fundamental ingredient used to remedy this situation. Most modern patients, in contrast, exhibit a combination of excess and deficiency, some qi stagnation and definitely symptoms of counterflow. In the Classical Pearl line, the most widely used products are formulas that in one way or another address symptoms of anxiety and insomnia. This fact alone can serve as an indicator for currently relevant up-down imbalances in the body: our primary focus needs to be on supporting the descending rather than the ascending momentum of the body. Peace

Pearls, for instance, a remedy based on the traditional Kidney yang tonic Qianyang Dan (Submerge the Yang Pellet), is a frequently used remedy; it also treats counterflow, but from another perspective than Metal Pearls or Counterflow Pearls, via a mechanism that we can discuss later on. But before we go there, I want to summarize Dr. Wu's unique approach in the following way: If in doubt, treat the Lung; use She Jie Xing Chong Tang to regulate stagnating qi anywhere in the body. And note that this principle is carried out by stimulating downward movement (rather than the dispersal) of Lung qi. Dr. Wu teaches us that pathologically upwelling qi ought to be directed downward rather than be diagnosed as a type of "wind," which would invariably lead to a frittering away of already deficient Lung qi.

QUINN: Talk about Banxia, if you would. It has to be part of any discussion, it seems to me, about descending qi dynamics.

HEINER: If you look at most Banxia containing remedies, such as Xiao Chaihu Tang or Banxia Xiexin Tang, you see that the lead symptom tends to be nausea and vomiting, essentially Stomach pathology. Banxia is indeed an herb that primarily reverses counterflow in the Stomach network. Because of the prominent use of the anti-phlegm remedy Erchen Tang in TCM herbalism, many of us have been tempted to think of Banxia first

as a Lung herb. In addition, I should mention that the ancient Chinese associated the Banxia ("midsummer") plant with the summer solstice and the 5th lunar month of the year. This is the central time when the current of universal qi movement in nature reverses course, switching gears from an outwardly expanding movement to a downward and inward course. In this most traditional way of thinking, Banxia is actually associated with the Heart, since Han dynasty cosmology associates the Heart with the climactic position of the 5th month during the year and the time period of 11 am – 1 pm during the day. Banxia, which is maturing around the solstice, absorbs this energetic shift in nature by embodying the descending quality that emerges at this time. The *Huangdi neijing* contains only 13 herbal remedies, and one of them is Banxia Shumi Tang—a remedy for treating insomnia, essentially a Heart disorder that also involves the Stomach in the relevant passage. The tidal hexagrams associated with the Stomach and the Heart are hexagram 43 and 44, respectively—a hexagram pair that signifies a patho-physiological relationship between Heart and Stomach, very much in the way that metal organs or *yangming* organs make a pair. What the herb Banxia treats is counterflow in both of these organs. Only secondarily does it affect the Lung.

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