INITIAL INFLUENCES:
THE LIVER IN SPRINGTIME

By John Heuertz, DOM

Spring is the season of initial influences and the liver is the organ of the same. For instance, the stages of fetal development are associated with progressive influences of the five viscera, where each organ in its turn bathes the fetus with its energy; the first organ in this progression is the liver. For an understanding of seasonal influences upon our health, it is revealing to think of the annual cycle as a self-contained and complete cycle of life, from birth to death. Winter is associated with the final stage of this annual life cycle. It is the most yin time of the year, just as the deathbed is the most yin time for the body. One might assume that spring, a season described as “yang within yang,” is a time of great strength, but spring is the time of beginnings—it is the year in its infancy and childhood. The yang is stirred to movement and extending its influence, but we are vulnerable. If there is no acute illness, spring is the best time for planning, nurturing the interior, and building anti-pathogenic qi. Spring is the time to rectify the latent pathology of winter and to preserve against pathology in the summer.

In spring, the internal (visceral) energy that effuses outward is associated with liver energy. Acute illness in the spring is often the result of a latent (heat) pathogen combining with some external factor. Chapter 3 of the Su Wen states that if a person is injured by cold in the winter, it will emerge as heat in the spring; and if he is harmed by wind in the spring, digestion in the summer will be damaged. The pathway that is most easily affected by the seasonal influence of spring is the shao yang. The wood phase (liver and the shao yang) should be considered in virtually every treatment plan when spring is the onset of symptoms. In fact, the Shang Han Lun states that in the spring, one shao yang symptom alone is sufficient for a shao yang diagnosis. These symptoms include alternating chills and fever, chest or flank fullness, loss of appetite, nausea or retching, a fine, wiry pulse, “dizzy vision,” or bitter taste in mouth.

Spring is a time when lurking pathogens, now rising to the surface and active, can be expelled. If cold penetrates in the winter and essence and wei qi are insufficient to eliminate it, it will emerge in the spring as heat when the yang qi effuses outward. If there is kidney deficiency, cold will lurk in the kidneys during winter. The external cold penetrates to the interior and lies dormant in the kidneys all winter, gradually transforming into heat. The kidneys belong to the water phase. In the springtime, the water phase passes its torch, so to speak, to the wood phase: the gall bladder and the liver. So the same pathogenic influence that was dormant in the kidney all winter becomes activated with the first influences of spring. Because of our vulnerability during this phase, wind-cold or wind-heat easily combine with the effusing interior heat. The location for this combination is often the shao yang, since it lies between the interior and the exterior.

At the advent of (lunar) winter, the taiyang channel is the pathway most easily damaged by the influence of environmental cold and cold-type viruses. If not expelled while the pathway is still open, the pathogen will follow the yang qi into the kidney for the winter. When it settles in the organ level, the cold pathogen gradually turns to heat by the progression of two concurrent and mutually enhancing pathogeneses. First, the cold factor contracts the tissue around it, which leads shortly to the development of localized stasis, which in turn transforms into heat. While this heat develops, the second pathogenesis kicks in. Since the kidney is the source and depot of jing, the pathogen receives nourishment while a guest in the organ. So, while being transformed into heat, the pathogen gains strength. As (lunar) spring approaches, the energetic influence (and the pathogen itself) transfers from the kidney to the liver. Before the liver has had a chance to adapt to the pathogen, the yang qi embarks on its journey to the exterior. The interstices begin to open and the shao yang becomes susceptible to influence. When the wind penetrates the interstices, the pathogens combine and become lodged between the interior and the exterior. There are many effective remedies and combinations to address these disease patterns.

Not all treatments in springtime involve acute flare up of latent heat. The physical, psychological, and spiritual turning in we did during winter, reached its pre-transformational extreme just before Chinese New Year. It is now time to look outward and ahead. As the organ of beginnings, the liver is also the organ most associated with planning and strategy, the first stage of action. People with strong liver qi and sufficient liver blood know how to extend themselves out into the world. If health is otherwise good, the body is free from latent heat as well as exterior invasion and one wishes to focus on planning for the year, this is the ideal time for it.

DISCUSSION OF FORMULAS FOR SPRING PATTERNS

Oftentimes, the latent heat that emerges in the spring is heat from constraint, characterized by disturbance of the spirit at night with restless sleep/tossing and turning in bed. Bitter herbs are not sufficient to clear this type of heat. In fact, if one only prescribes bitter herbs to cool and clear heat, one runs the risk of concealing the heat, which can prolong the treatment or even create a new latency. This is a common error among practitioners who prescribe modern anti-viral formulas automatically without differentiating the pattern.
first. The anti-viral formulas are useful when the pathogen is in the qi aspect (using a wen bing model), but have little effect against qi from constraint or nutritive level heat. It is better to differentiate the pattern first. Below are some suggestions for useful formulas for spring patterns. The first few describe treatment of acute patterns involving heat. These are followed by formulas that can enhance the spring energy patterns in healthy individuals.

**Minor Bupleurum Formula** (Xiao Chai Hu Tang) is one of the most versatile formulas to utilize with spring onset disease. It is the quintessential shao yang formula and as such can address the pathogenic factors rising from the interior as well as external influences attempting to penetrate to the interior. If there are no signs and symptoms, it can be used as a preventative formula in spring by itself. If there is spring illness, depending on concomitant signs and symptoms, the practitioner may need to augment the treatment by intensifying the heat-clearing action with *Viola Clear Fire Formula* (Di Ding Qing Huo Pian) or *Coptis Relieve Toxicity Formula* (Huang Lian Jie Du Pian) or intensifying the wind-heat dispersing action with *Yin Chiao Formula* (Yin Qiao San). *Viola Clear Fire Formula* is especially effective for addressing the effusing interior heat during springtime because so many of its ingredients clear heat from the liver. However, use *Viola Clear Fire Formula* in these instances if the pathogen is in the qi level. *Coptis Relieve Toxicity Formula* is preferred if there is damp-heat or dry stool in the pattern or if the heat is in the nutritive level.

**Gentiana Drain Fire Formula** (Long Dan Xie Gan Tang) is useful when the pattern is heat or damp heat in the liver/gall bladder. This can manifest as acute sinusitis above the eyebrows, flare up of herpes zoster or simplex, bitter taste in mouth. It is my experience from phone consultations with practitioners that there are many who assume that if their patient’s symptoms are clearly brought on by a virus or some other external pathogen, that the disease is external, like wind-cold or wind-heat. This is not true. If the pulse is not superficial and there is no aversion to wind, the pathogen is internal. Gentiana Drain Fire Formula is especially effective for liver/gall bladder heat or damp-heat in the spring or anytime. Its relatively high percentage of sheng di huang (fresh rehmannia) is ideal for this latent heat rising into the liver from the weak kidneys.

**Bupleurum and Cinnamon Formula** (Chai Hu Gui Zhi Tang) is useful when wind-cold from the exterior has combined with the effusing interior heat or when wind cold is menacing the muscle layer.

Among the formulas that can enhance a person’s adaptation to spring energies in the absence of acute pathogenic influence are **Bupleurum D Formula** (Chai Hu Jia Long Gu Mu Li Tang), **Free and Easy Wanderer Plus Formula** (Jia Wei Xiao Yao San), **Bupleurum and Tang Kuei Formula** (Xiao Yao Wan), **Ming Mu Formula** (Ming Mu Di Huang Wan), and **Pinellia and Magnolia Bark Formula** (Ban Xia Hou Po Tang). The first three formulas mentioned help to relax and disperse stress, freeing decision-making and planning from anxiety.

**Pinellia and Magnolia Bark Formula** (Ban Xia Hou Po Tang), commonly reserved for use against “plum pit qi” syndrome, can actually be used to treat any disease where the pattern is liver qi stagnation combining with phlegm in the throat, chest, or stomach. It is common in damp climates to use Pinellia and Magnolia Bark Formula to combat stress, since qi stasis so easily combines with phlegm in these regions. It is popular for students in damp climates to take Pinellia and Magnolia Bark Formula during midterms and finals.

**Ming Mu Formula** (Ming Mu Di Huang Wan), when taken in standard dosage, nourishes the eyes by nourishing the liver and kidneys. Smaller doses (1/3rd or 1/6th) of certain formulas tend to influence the spirit rather than the physiology. Ming Mu Formula, taken at these “spirit-dose” levels can be helpful to those seeking “vision” of how plans will play out through the course of the year.

I would mention too, that long-term liver disease theoretically can best be treated during spring, when the liver organ is most easily influenced and open. **Liver C Formula** (Gan C Pian) is balanced and versatile for treating all manner of chronic liver disease since it is supportive and nourishing, while mildly clearing toxin from the liver.

**Endnotes**

1 “Dizzy Vision” is distorted vision with a spinning sensation in the head. It is usually an indication that appears in severe shaoyang stage disease, but can appear when the disease is mild or moderate.

2 According to Guohui Liu’s book, Warm Diseases: A Clinical Guide, the most useful single ingredient to disperse constrained heat in the chest, diaphragm or shao yang is dan dou chi (semen sojae preparatum). Not only does it disperse the constraint, but it can reach the kidneys and disperse lingering cold from that organ. It accomplishes these actions without further damaging the yin. In cold and flu season it is prudent to keep dan dou chi on hand as granules or in bulk. It can be combined with any of the formulas in this discussion when there is constrained heat or lingering cold transforming into heat.

3 I am a self-proclaimed connoisseur when it comes to coffee. I noticed a bitter taste in my mouth throughout the 15 days of Chinese New Year, to the point where the resident bitterness interfered with my ability to detect the true taste of my coffee, and therefore my ability to enjoy it. I had no other shaoyang symptoms at the time. Taking Gentiana Drain Fire Formula for 2+ days restored my relationship with good coffee.

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