

The Source of Pain: ***Diagnosing and Treating the Root Cause***

By Amanda Lewis, L.Ac.

To treat any illness in Chinese Medicine, we must first clarify what is referred to as the “branch” and “root.” Using the “Four Methods of Diagnosis”—looking, listening, asking, and feeling—we can pull apart the branches, or secondary signs and symptoms, in search of the first cause, or root. Generally speaking, acute illnesses are seen as branches, while chronic imbalances are the root.

Determining the Cause of Pain

The Chinese medical physician divides the causes of all illness into three main categories: “external,” “internal,” and “other.”

- **External causes** (also known as environmental factors) are classified as: wind, cold, heat, dampness, dryness, and summer-heat. These become causes of disease when the equilibrium between the body and the environment breaks down, either because the climate is particularly excessive or because the body is weak in relation to the strength of the environment.

If due to an external cause, pain is most commonly associated with either: wind, cold, heat, dampness, or a combination of these. When wind is a cause, the pain will move around, come and go, or frequently change in nature. Cold pain contracts the body causing stiffness and difficulty in movement and is relieved by warmth. Pain from heat is characterized by redness and swelling that is warm to the touch and relieved by cold. Damp pain will show signs of swelling and is usually accompanied by an overall feeling of aching and heaviness.

- **Inner causes** refer to the mental/emotional state, and are most commonly observed or experienced as an excess or deficiency of: anger, joy, worry, sadness, or fear. The inner causes are considered equally important among all potential causes of illness. The state of the physical body can directly affect mental processes and emotions, and likewise the mind and emotions can directly affect the state of the physical body.

Pain that is due to inner causes may require more time to diagnose since the mental and emotional levels of the body manifest relatively more subtle expressions than the physical body.

- **Other causes** of illness are: weak constitution, under/over-exertion, excessive/restrained sexual activity, poor diet, trauma (physical or mental), parasites, poisons, and improper treatment (ie. The side effects of drugs).

In order to confirm the causes of disease, we conduct a thorough inquiry into the patient’s health history, listen to the quality of the pulse, examine the tongue, palpate affected areas of the body, check for range of motion, and utilize any other related diagnostic methods.

Establishing the Pattern

Once we've determined the cause, we then identify what is called a "**Pattern of Disharmony**." This is the essence of Chinese medical diagnosis and involves looking for relationships rather than single causes. Rather than making a list of symptoms and signs and analyzing them one by one to find a single cause, in Chinese medicine we form an overall picture that takes into consideration the symptoms and signs of the entire body and mind in order to identify a pattern. For example, the single Western medical diagnosis of "Herniated Disc" has three main pattern differentiations in Chinese medicine:

- **Cold** attacking the back, which is characterized by contracted muscle spasms and stiffness that is relieved by warmth.
- **Blood and qi (chi) stagnation** is characterized by sharp, fixed, severe pain that is relieved by movement.
- **Liver and kidney weakness** due to degeneration is characterized by a chronic dull ache that is worse with movement and responds well to pressure.

Successful Treatment of Pain

Ideally, a Chinese medical doctor will have the opportunity to treat before an illness arises. In ancient China, the physician's responsibility was to keep their patients healthy. If the patient became ill, they would not have to pay for the doctor's services. However, nowadays, Chinese medical practitioners very rarely have this luxury, and particularly in the West, they are more commonly sought out as a last resort.

The methods available in Chinese medicine for treating pain are extensive. To successfully treat pain, we generally need to consider whether the pain is "excess" or "deficient" in nature. Clinically, **excess pain** is: acute, strong, specific, worse with pressure, and accompanied by an excess pulse and overall restlessness. **Deficient pain** is: chronic in nature, alleviated with pressure, generalized, and accompanied by overall weakness, apathy, and an empty pulse.

To treat excess pain, we use sedating or draining acupuncture points and herbs, cupping, vigorous massage, or any appropriate method to remove excess. There is a famous statement in Chinese medicine: "If there is free flow, there is no pain. If there is pain, there is no free flow." This refers to the channel or meridian system of the body; excess pain involves obstruction in the channels and to treat it, we must use a method that will remove the specific obstruction.

To treat pain that is more deficient in nature, we use methods that strengthen the body, such as supplementing acupuncture points, tonic herbs, moxibustion (a technique that involves warming the body), restorative massage, and any other method that supports vitality.

Acupuncture, herbal medicine, dietary and lifestyle changes, as well as techniques that work more specifically with the mind, such as meditation, all can be

considered for use in the treatment of pain. As in all conditions, the specific biography of the individual determines which methods will best guide the body back to its natural state of balance.

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