

Neither Fully Sick Nor Fully Well— Body and Spirit in *Shao Yang*, A Dietary Approach

By Andrew Serman

Recovery from an illness can follow a predictable course, but sometimes we seem caught between sickness and full health—we're no longer actively sick, but our progress towards full recovery remains elusive. We thought we were over the hump; we were planning our return to feeling really well and returning to a full schedule, but then we seem to relapse. Sometimes this pattern plays out over long periods, sometimes within each day, with mornings looking strong only to "crash" in the afternoons. These "crashes" have two distinct aspects:

- A disappointing, frustrating, and fearful sense that our progress is halted and now unpredictable.

- Recurrence of some actual symptoms of illness, often in a "peek-a-boo" fashion: we feel better, then not, then better again, then not....

We must be clear—at this stage, we are no longer fully sick as before, as during the full experience of illness. If there was a fever, it is now gone, if there was concern about survival, now we know we'll survive. At the same time, however, the illness refuses to leave. It lingers like a guest who gathers their things and stands by the door, but turns back to engage in yet another discussion that—at least in terms of being an illness—we could do without. There can be a rhythmic afternoon fever with no apparent active infection, there can be a tightness just below the ribs constricting breath or causing pain, there can be a lingering cough, and above all malaise and sense of tidal weakness, coming and going, but never going away. It's pretty easy to feel discouraged and lose confidence in recovery.

This complex scenario is described in the Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine (*Nei Jing*), the foundation text of Chinese medicine (already existent in the first century CE). In chapter six of the *Nei Jing's Su Wen* section, a fundamental geography of illness is presented:

- The first stage of illness involves the exterior, and strategy for treatment is based on pushing a pathogen back out, represented by sneezing, sweating, and coughing. The diet at this stage should aim to support the fluids necessary to sweat and the qi necessary to sneeze, cough, and transport fluid resources to enact expulsion from the exterior. This is the way to support immunity at the first stage of defense.

- If this fails, or if the pathogen is particularly strong, first defenses falter and the pathogen can penetrate to the interior. Here, for example, a head cold has not been resolved (due to deficiency of fluids and qi) and we become aware that the illness is progressing deep into our chest and eventually to our digestion: we lose appetite, we may feel mild or severe nausea. The strategy needed here is no longer to expel the pathogenic cause of illness up and out, as is the case when the illness is still in the external level. Now, since the pathogenic factor has become internal, the body's response needs to be to push it out through digestion, through purging the bowels.

All this is clear enough, following the *Su Wen's* description of the body's energetics being external, internal, and also having a pivot.

While the specifics can present in different ways, if things follow this course (that is, if we have sufficient basic health to enact the necessary responses), we will recover in a predictable fashion, quite possibly returning to better health than we had before.

These two stages are the most crucial for everyone to know about, and from a dietary point of view, these stages are the focus of basic home-health practice: getting sufficient rest and eating health-supporting foods with enough moistness cooked in. But the *Su Wen* also defines a scenario where the pathogenic factor is only partially (or incorrectly) handled. Now, (again according to chapter 6) the external pathogenic factor becomes "trapped" between the exterior and interior. Things have become complicated, and symptoms are quixotic. Sometimes we feel well, other times not. The *Su Wen* gives further insight on how and where the pathogenic factor is moving about, never quite able to exit and be resolved:

When the pathogenic factor floats up toward the exterior, we feel cold; when the pathogenic factor sinks deeper toward the interior, we feel hot.

For the individual caught here, this means a dance of chills and fever, or, using the terms cold and hot metaphorically, symptoms that hide (along with feeling tired or sluggish) alternating (in short cycles or quite long waves) with symptoms that flare up often dramatically. Yes, this is a big part of how most of us are, in complex ways, whether recovering from a cold, flu, bronchitis, or a serious but survivable case of COVID-19. Or, in a more body-politic perspective, this back-and-forth-but-never-clearing status can be a useful way to view the illnesses of racism, classism, misogyny, and the other pressing social ills that seem to trap us more some times than others, but in fact are always present.

Classical Chinese medicine defines this as the *shao yang* stage, one of the six stages described in exquisite detail in the seminal work known as *Shang Han Lun* or *Treatise on Cold Injury*, a text composed by Zhang Zhong-Jing by the year 220 CE. At the *shao yang* stage, a person has a sense of getting better, then falls back, losing confidence in ever getting through it. There can be an odd taste in the mouth, bitter or metallic, a sense of thirst that water doesn't satisfy, a surprising light-headedness or dizziness, and a fullness or achiness in the ribs called "knotting". There may have been a pathogen that initiated this illness, but the *Shang Han Lun* notes that most individuals manage to overcome the pathogen using the first stage method (sweating it out, essentially) or the second stage method (resolving through the digestion and elimination). It then explains why some get caught with a lingering condition:

"Blood is weak, qi is exhausted; the interstitial spaces are vulnerable. Evil Qi enters, Upright Qi contends without full success. Symptoms follow, knotting below the ribs" (SHL, entry 97).

Saying this again in common modern language:

Diet and digestion have failed to nourish at the level of blood's richness, we are tapped out and tired at a level that even a good sleep doesn't

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restore. A germ or other health challenge has (definitely the worst word in the English language) penetrated inside, and our immune responses have not been sufficient to push it out, so to speak. We are stuck. Regular treatments can't resolve the situation because the pathogen is "hiding" in the spaces where medicines don't easily reach. We feel all knotted up.

The solution is rest, hydrate, nourish, and harmonize.

A very quick look at the most popular and important herbal formulas for *shao yang* stage treatment from the *Shang Han Lun* outlines the fundamental treatment strategies. Although dietary theory is not exactly the same as that of herbal medicine, with some care, meaningful parallels can be drawn.

XIAO CHAI HU TANG/MINOR BUPLEURUM DECOCTION

HERBS IN XIAO CHAI HU TANG	FUNCTION IN FORMULA, SIMPLY STATED
<i>Chai Hu</i> / Bupleurm	Relaxes and spreads liver qi, resolves stagnation and stuckness.
<i>Huang Qin</i> / Scutellaria	Clears heat, especially in the middle burner.
<i>Zhi Ban Xia</i> / Prepared Pinellia	Resolves rebellious qi (including nausea and coughing), clears phlegm, dries dampness, harmonizes digestion.
<i>Sheng Jiang</i> / Fresh Ginger	Strengthens digestion through introducing gentle warmth, helps stop coughing.
<i>Ren Shen</i> / Ginseng	Secures deep strength in order to prevent illness penetrating further to the interior.
<i>Zhi Gan Cao</i> / Honey-fried true Licorice Root	Improves assimilation of nutrients in the diet, and helps calm anxiety through harmonizing quality.
<i>Da Zao</i> / Red Jujube Dates	Helps build blood (along with other herbs here) and strengthens digestion.

So, Zhang Zhong-Jing is telling us in this formula that we need to:

- + Digest better
- + Clear dampness or phlegm better
- + Open the stomach to welcome food, ensuring that our diet is not in a subtle way being rejected (this addresses the lack of appetite or mild nausea for which *Zhi Ban Xia*/Prepared Pinellia is included)
- + Restore warmth to sluggish digestion
- + Clear heat (or inflammation) that is likely to accrue in the middle because we are stuck with no easy exit strategy for the lingering pathogen
- + Secure deep strength in Kidneys and Lung

Now we can intelligently apply classical strategies for *shao yang* status with foods we can find anywhere. Here are the basic strategies, associated with food groups:

STRATEGY	DIETARY APPROACH	SAMPLE FOODS	COMMENT
Improve Digestion and Harmonize Middle	Dramatically improving digestion allows harmonization. Stick consistently with simple meals, easy to digest. Avoid fried foods, dairy, sugar, or meals that mix too many food types.	See recipes below.	Simple meals that are easy to digest are the most important aspect of sustained healing for chronic illness.
Clear Dampness and Resolve Phlegm	Avoid foods that tend to increase dampness or phlegm, while including some foods to help clearing.	Avoid dairy (especially cheese), sugar, and for many, gluten. Avoid overeating, avoid more than very moderate alcohol consumption, likewise with hot spices, onion, and garlic. Include fresh ginger, fresh herbs like dill, cumin, celery seed. Include radish.	Dampness and phlegm are serious impediments to clearing chronic illness. Sometimes clearing phlegm or dampness alone is enough to allow intrinsic healing to proceed.

<p>Open the Stomach to Welcome Foods, Ensure Peristalsis and Stomach Qi Descension</p>	<p>Increase fluids, foods with descending vectors, whole grains and small beans for fiber, some crunchy foods, true appetizers, fruits and nuts with Lung affinity.</p>	<p>Soups, carrot, daikon, parsnip, sweet potato, millet, oats, lentils, adzuki beans, almonds, pumpkin seeds, apples, pears, artichokes, olives, kale.</p>	<p>Stomach energy should descend; if rising, it is termed “rebellious” and leads to loss of appetite (or nausea) that interferes with a person regaining enough strength to resolve a <i>shao yang</i> condition. Peristalsis is energized by Lung Qi descension.</p>
<p>Nourish Fluids to Hydrate, Build Blood, and Invigorate Blood</p>	<p>Wet-cooked foods to provide slowly absorbed hydration, and spices to help assimilate and transport those fluids</p>	<p>Congee, porridges, soups, stews, steamed grains, parsley, cilantro, thyme, dill, rosemary, oregano, scallions, etc. To build blood, include red meat, berries, beets, dark leafy greens.</p>	<p>Wet-cooked foods are often better than drinking water for deep hydration. Avoid dehydrating habits. Vegetarian diets can support building blood, with sufficient care and focus.</p>
<p>Protect and Warm the Middle</p>	<p>Protect the middle with simple, cooked meals that don’t tax digestion, with inclusion of foods to strengthen spleen/pancreas.</p>	<p>Congee, sweet potato, or simple meals with just rice and vegetable, or just vegetables and meat/fish. These digest more easily and efficiently. Warming spices (not hot!) such as fresh ginger, turmeric, scallions, nutmeg, etc.</p>	<p>Digestion needs to be strong to support resolution of chronic or <i>shao yang</i> conditions. Avoid cold or raw food, as well as cold drinks.</p>
<p>Clear Heat</p>	<p>Heat can get trapped as the body sends <i>wei qi</i> (immune forces and yang qi) to areas of stagnation.</p>	<p>Bitter greens, including radicchio, endive, broccoli rabe, chicory, dandelion greens, bitter melon. Mung or other sprouts are good (lightly cooked). String beans and snow peas are mild diuretics (as are barley and job’s tears).</p>	<p>Bitter greens cool heat, sprouts clear heat, and mild diuretic foods drain heat.</p>
<p>Secure Deep Strength</p>	<p>It’s important not to simply <i>stimulate</i> the body, which leads to more taxation. Foods that consolidate and astringe are more useful than, say, coffee or chocolate that directly stimulate.</p>	<p>Bone broth (not spicy), red beans, black beans, soybeans, black sesame seeds, mushrooms, seaweeds, clams, oysters, mussels, scallop, sour (unripe) fruits.</p>	<p>Ginseng is used in the herbal formula to tonify kidneys while anchoring heart and lung qi. In diet, strongly nourishing foods with a kidney affinity help fulfill that role.</p>

SAMPLE MEALS

Oden Thin Stew

- kombu | 1 piece
- dried black mushrooms | 8 medium-size
- daikon | 1 medium-size, washed and cut into 1-inch chunks
- carrot | 3 medium or large carrots, washed, cut into 1-inch chunks
- tofu (optional) | 1 pound block, cut into 1-inch chunks
- water | about 10-12 cups
- tamari | 1/2 cup
- mirin or sake | 1 cup
- sea salt | to taste
- toasted sesame oil | splash
- hard boiled egg (optional) | 1 per person
- cilantro or parsley | as garnish

Place the kombu (a dried seaweed used for stock) and the dried black mushrooms in a pot with 10-12 cups cool water (just under 3 liters). Bring to a boil, reduce to a simmer. After 10-15 minutes, remove the kombu (it can be sliced and used in stir-fry or sauté dishes) and the black mushrooms (they can be cooled, sliced, and used in other dishes, but discard the stems which never fully soften).

Add the tamari and mirin (or sake). Reserve the toasted sesame oil until later.

Wash, trim, and cut the daikon and carrots into 1-inch chunks. Add to the pot. Simmer for 30-60 minutes. Other greens and root vegetables can be added, if desired, such as celery, snow peas, bok choy, Napa cabbage, sweet potato, or others (add long-cooking vegetables earlier, shorter ones like snow peas shortly before serving).

If using tofu, add for the last 5 minutes before serving, just enough to warm through.

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Taste and adjust for salt; add the splash of toasted sesame oil and cilantro (or parsley) as serving each bowl.

Fish or Tofu with Fermented Black Beans

fish fillets (or tofu) | 1.5 pounds fish fillets of your choice, cut into portions (or 2 pounds tofu, cut into large cubes)

scallions | 2-3, sliced coarsely

carrots | 2 medium, sliced fairly thinly on the bias

celery | 2 stalks, sliced to match the carrots

fresh ginger | 3 slices, finely slivered

five-spice powder | 1/4 tsp

grapeseed oil (or organic peanut oil) | 2 Tbsp

fermented black beans | 2 Tbsp, soaked and rinsed, whole or chopped

dried tree ear mushrooms | 1/4 cup (dry), soaked and chopped coarsely

tamari | 1/4 cup

rice wine | 1 cup

organic corn starch (or kuzu powder) | 1 Tbsp, mixed with cool water

toasted sesame oil | a healthy splash

fresh cilantro | a few sprigs per person as garnish

Soak the dried fermented beans in a bowl of water for 30 minutes or more (this can be done well in advance to save time, even overnight). Soak the tree ear mushrooms in a separate bowl.

Heat a large heavy pan (or wok). Add the grapeseed or other high-heat cooking oil, the ginger slivers, the scallions, carrot, celery, and the five-spice powder. Then add the soaked fermented black beans (whole, mashed or chopped, as you like, but do not add the soaking liquid). Add the tree ear mushrooms, chopped, (without their soaking water) and the fish (or tofu). Handle the fish carefully in the pan or wok to avoid breaking it up.

After a moment, splash in the tamari and add the cooking wine. As soon as the dish is bubbling and most of the alcohol has evaporated (4-5 minutes), add the dissolved cornstarch (or kuzu) and stir gently. Cornstarch thickens when it reaches bubbling temperature. As soon as it does, the dish is ready. Adjust by adding more dissolved cornstarch if the pan sauce is thin, or open with a splash of water if too thick. Add the cilantro. Serve immediately with steamed rice and green vegetable.

Andrew Sterman is the author of *Welcoming Food, Diet as Medicine for the Home Cook and Other Healers*. These two volumes offer a unique entry into understanding the energetics of food, explain how foods work in common sense language and provide easy-to-follow recipes for everyday eating. Andrew teaches food energetics classes and sees private clients for dietary therapy and medical qigong in New York City. He has studied broadly in holistic cooking, meditation, and tai chi,

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Both books are available for sale at www.gfcherbs.com.