



The Meaning of Etiology, Breakout of Illness, and Pathomechanism in Chinese Medicine.

This is a translation / adaptation from a intro passage from the book, Chinese Medicine's Theory of Pathomechanism and Cause of Disease (中医病因病机学)

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Disease is a destruction of the balance among human being's interior (organs), among various kinds of factors / elements, and in-between a person and their environment. This gives rise to a condition [leading to] abnormal structure and functioning as well as an inability to recover quickly on one's own. The goal of understanding this subject is to comprehensively, systematically, and deeply recognize the laws of human disease. This of course leads to a firm foundation in the accurate diagnosis, prevention and treatment of disease. This is a significant part of Chinese Medicine's fundamental theory. This topic can be broken down into three sections: cause of disease, onset of disease, and pathomechanism.

1) Cause of disease (Etiology): 病因 (bìng yīn)

The reason that disease arises basically can be divided into two types.

The first is a patient that is originally healthy and only acquires a disease because they have an invasion. This is called a *primary cause of disease*. It further can be divided into external, internal, and other causes:

- **External** contraction of evil, such as wind, cold, summerheat, damp, dryness, and fire. These are combined into the term, 'six excesses'. It also includes very strong contagious (infectious) diseases.
- **Internal** damage can come about from excessive emotional activity (happiness, anger, anxiety, pensiveness, sorrow, fear, and fright), inappropriate diet, excessive fatigue, excessive comfort and ease.
- **Other** disease causes are traumas, inappropriate taking of medicine, insect bites, and wild animal bites.

The second type is called a *secondary cause of disease*. This occurs in a type of person that has been ill for some time. Within their original course of disease a secondary pathological engenderment arises. For example, in some diseases a situation occurs where the blood does not flow smoothly, gradually leading to stasis and stagnation, resulting in *static blood*. Therefore the static blood can in turn produce additional new

disease pathology by blocking the movement of qi, blood, and fluids. Three types of secondary cause of diseases are water-damp, phlegm-rheum, and blood stasis.

2) Breakout of an illness: 发病 (*fā bìng*)

The breakout of an illness essentially refers to the initial outbreak and the flare-ups with in the course of a disease. To understand the laws related to a breakout one must consider the various factors that it is related to. This includes, 1) the intensity and nature of the factors that cause the disease, 2) the exuberance and debilitation of the body's resistance, 3) one's constitutional type, and 4) the environmental influences that causes disease. The aim of such analysis is to manage the disease efficiently by predicting what factors will lead to a breakout, as well as [once the disease has resolved] what actions will be able to prevent an additional outbreak. All of this will achieve the goal of preventing disease, treating disease, and understanding the prognosis.

Example: A patient is diagnosed with a pattern of phlegm-damp cold due to extreme environmental invasion, and has the chief complaint of diarrhea. She has a history of such episodes. One realizes that she has a damp-cold constitution (which allowed the invasion) and her body's resistance is on the deficient side. One can use all of this information to tell the patient what not to do (eat ice-cream and over exert herself) in the short term as well as understand what steps need to be taken to prevent future outbreaks. All diseases can be analyzed with the above four criteria.

3) Pathomechanism 病机 (*bìng jī*)

Note: Wiseman mentions that the term pathomechanism in Chinese medicine is the same as Western medicine's "etiology" in Western Medicine.

The pathomechanism refers to the mechanism of the disease's occurrence, development, transformation, and outcome (passing of a crisis). Even within the same type of disease, because of differing patient constitutions, the pathomechanism will be different. Therefore the pathomechanism is ever changing.

Example: Two people have the common disease of headache.

The first patient may have a *cause of disease* of excess emotions. The pathomechanism may therefore be that the liver becomes stagnant and creates an excess of fire, which rises up to the head and causes headache.

The second patient may have a *cause of disease* of excessive work, which leads to the pathomechanism of qi depletion that does not allow the clear qi to ascend properly to the head, where turbidity collects and causes a qi blockage in the headache, manifesting as headache.

Both patients come in with the same complaint, but both will present with different surrounding signs and symptoms so that the practitioner can determine the proper pathomechanism and hence treatment.

Therefore in short the pathomechanism is the story behind the chief complaint. To determine the pathomechanism one might ask, “why is this problem arising?”, or “what process in the body is allowing the pathology to occur.”

However, within pathomechanisms that are complex and varied there exist some common rules. After one grasps these basic pathomechanisms then one grasps and understands the most basic path of studying disease. These fundamental mechanisms include the fight between evil and correct [qi], *yin* and *yang* dysfunction, and abnormal qi, blood, and fluids (etc.). Moreover, one must note that humans have different constitutional aspects, structure (i.e. organs), and physiological activity and function. Consequently during the course of a disease, there are separate pathomechanisms.

One should also note that Chinese medicine has different systems of diagnosis and treatment and one should understand that the diseases within those systems come about due to different pathomechanisms. For example, there are *zàng-fǔ* (bowel and visceral) pathomechanisms, *jīng-luò* (channels and network vessels) pathomechanisms, nine orifice pathomechanisms, and structural pathomechanisms, that have essentially separate pathomechanisms. There are also systems like four aspects (Warm Disease model) and 6 levels (Cold Damage model) that are only somewhat contained within the *zàng-fǔ* system. They also have separate pathomechanisms associated with their diseases. But overall, *zàng-fǔ* is the most widely used system, but is not appropriate for all situations. One should be flexible in their choice of systems and understanding of pathomechanisms.