

THE FOUR PHASES OF THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

EBB AND FLOW OF YIN AND YANG IN THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE

Menstrual blood is not like "ordinary" Blood in Chinese medicine. In other words, the "Blood" that nourish the eyes and the sinews is not the same as menstrual blood. Menstrual blood is a direct manifestation of the Kidney-Essence equivalent to sperm in men. Menstrual Blood is called Tian Gui which could be translated as "Heavenly Dew" although the character Gui actually refers to the 10th Stem that pertains to Water. The association with Water is not casual as menstrual Blood is part of Water and derives from the Yin part of the Kidneys. The great gynaecologist of the Qing dynasty Fu Qing Zhu often stressed this, saying that not by chance menstrual blood is called Jing Shui ("Period Water").

The menstrual cycle is like a tide of Yin and Yang: the "water" of this tide is the substance of the Kidneys in its Yin and Yang aspect. Therefore, it is the ebb and flow of Kidney-Yin and Kidney-Yang that determines the menstrual cycle. The menstrual cycle goes through two moments of transformation of Yin to Yang and vice versa: the onset of the period marks the maximum of Yang and the transformation from Yang to Yin while the onset of ovulation marks the maximum of Yin and the transformation of Yin to Yang. This transformation, together with the discharge of menstrual blood and the eggs, is under the control of the Heart whose Qi needs to go down to communicate with the Kidneys. See Figure 1.

THE FOUR PHASES

The menstrual cycle may be divided into four phases as follows:

1. the period itself lasting approximately 5 days
2. the post-menstrual phase of about 1 week
3. the inter-menstrual phase of about 1 week
4. the pre-menstrual phase also lasting approximately 1 week.

The following is a description of the physiology of each phase with the relevant treatment principle.
See Figure 2 and 3.

Phase 1 - the period

During the period, Blood moves and both Qi and Blood move downwards. During the period, expelling the "old" (i.e. old Blood) is important: if not enough "old" expelled, this could lead to "retention of menses". Most people pay attention to excessive bleeding but scanty bleeding may lead to "retention of menses" and Blood stasis. Just before the beginning of the period, Yang is at its maximum and it rapidly decreases with the onset of the period. It is a moment of transformation from Yang to Yin. Pre-menstrual symptoms are often due to Heat and the reason they rapidly disappear with the onset of the period is precisely because Yang decreases rapidly as soon as the period starts.

Treatment principle: invigorate Blood. If bleeding is heavy, invigorate Blood and stop bleeding.

Phase 2 - the post-menstrual phase

This lasts for approximately 1 week starting from the end of the period. At this time, Blood and Yin are relatively empty but Yin is beginning to rise. The rapid decrease of Yang that takes place with the onset of the period ensures the growth of Yin (mutual consuming of Yin and Yang). This phase is therefore an important crossroads of Yin and Yang and it influences the whole menstrual cycle. Growth of Yin

also implies growth of fluids which are manifested by the clear, egg-white-like vaginal secretion that occurs before ovulation. The post-menstrual phase is crucial to establish a regular cycle. It is therefore important to treat during this phase to establish the foundations for a good menstrual cycle.

Treatment principle: nourish Blood, tonify the Kidneys.

Phase 3 - the inter-menstrual phase (ovulation)

During the third phase, the Chong Mai and Ren Mai are in full activity and they promote ovulation. In this phase, Yin reaches its maximum and Yang starts to grow rapidly. It is a moment of transformation from Yin to Yang. Qi and Blood are active in this phase: this is similar to the activity of Qi and Blood during the period except that during the former phase there is an upward movement of Qi and Blood and during the latter a downward movement. This upward movement affects the Heart and Liver channels often with Heat.

During the third phase, physiological activity is concentrated on the lateral abdomen (Shao Fu) while during the period it is concentrated on the central abdomen (Xiao Fu).

During the third phase there is an increase in fluids and there should be a transparent, egg-white-like vaginal secretion immediately before ovulation. This should last at least 3 days. An absence of such secretion indicates a Kidney deficiency even in the absence of any Kidney symptom.

Treatment principle: tonify the Kidneys, strengthen the Spleen, resolve Dampness.

Phase 4 - the pre-menstrual phase

During the fourth phase, Yang reaches its maximum and Qi moves. Yin decreases to allow growth of Yang (mutual consumption of Yin and Yang). The decrease of Yin and growth of Yang during this phase is comparable to the increase of Yang and decrease of Yin during the second phase but it is more significant. Growth of Yang implies that there is warmth in the Uterus at this time. Cold in the Uterus prevents fertilization of the egg. As this is a time of maximum Yang, Yin pathogenic factors affect the Uterus especially at this time as they rely on Yang to be dispersed. Examples of Yin pathogenic factors are Blood stasis, Phlegm, Cold and Dampness. Endometriosis and polycystic ovary are characterized by Yin pathogenic factors (Blood stasis and Damp-Phlegm) and therefore treatment by warming Yang in this phase is important.

Treatment principle: move Qi, stimulate the free flow of Liver-Qi, invigorate Blood, warm the Uterus.

ADAPTING THE TREATMENT PRINCIPLE TO THE FOUR PHASES

Adapting the treatment principles to the four phases is crucial in treating gynaecological problems. By adapting the treatment principle to the four phases, the medication will work better because it follows the natural rhythm of women's physiology and the ebb and flow of Yin and Yang in the menstrual cycle. Adapting the treatment principle to the four phases is particularly useful in complex gynaecological conditions when 2, 3 or even 4 different remedies are used.

I will illustrate this principle with examples of increasing complexity.

Stagnation of Liver-Qi

Let us assume that a woman suffers purely from Liver-Qi stagnation and no other pattern. If she suffers from pre-menstrual tension we might want to prescribe Freeing Constraint and the best time to administer this is in the pre-menstrual phase, i.e. roughly a week before the period. There would be not much point in giving this remedy in the post-menstrual phase because at that time Blood is relatively empty: as Blood is the mother of Qi, moving Qi at this time would have little effect.

Blood stasis

If a woman suffers from Blood stasis and painful periods, we prescribe Stir Field of Elixir. The best time to give this remedy would be in Phase 1, i.e. during the period because at this time the Blood is already moving. However, the remedy could be started a few days before the period. Again, there would be not much point in giving this remedy after the period when Blood is relatively empty: at such a time, the remedy would have little effect.

If the period is heavy, we can still invigorate Blood in phase 1 but we should replace Stir Field of Elixir with Invigorate Blood and Stem the Flow.

Liver-Qi stagnation with Liver-Blood deficiency

Let us assume a woman suffers from pre-menstrual tension caused by Liver-Qi stagnation occurring against a background of Liver-Blood deficiency. In this case we can prescribe Freeing the Moon for the pre-menstrual phase and Precious Sea during the post-menstrual phase (possibly extending to Phase 3).

This is an excellent combination and timing that I use frequently.

Liver-Blood stasis and Kidney deficiency

Liver-Blood stasis and Kidney deficiency occur simultaneously very frequently: these patterns may cause painful and/or irregular periods.

We can prescribe Unicorn Pearl or Growing Jade (according to whether there is Kidney-Yang or Kidney-Yin deficiency respectively) to be taken during phases 2 and 3, and Stir Field of Elixir during phases 4 and 1.

If the period is heavy, we can still invigorate Blood in phase 1 but we should replace Stir Field of Elixir with Invigorate Blood and Stem the Flow.

Liver-Qi stagnation, Liver-Blood stasis, Kidney deficiency

For these three patterns we can prescribe Freeing the Moon (or Freeing Constraint) during phase 4, Stir Field of Elixir during phase 1 (or Invigorate Blood and Stem the Flow if the period is heavy), and Unicorn Pearl or Growing Jade (according to whether there is Kidney-Yang or Kidney-Yin deficiency respectively) during phases 2 and 3.

Liver-Blood stasis, Liver-Blood deficiency

Stir Field of Elixir during phases 4 and 1 (or Invigorate Blood and Stem the Flow if the period is heavy) and Precious Sea during phase 2.

Liver-Blood stasis, Kidney-Yang deficiency, Dampness

Stir Field of Elixir during phases 4 and 1 (or Invigorate Blood and Stem the Flow if the period is heavy), Unicorn Pearl during phases 2 and 3 and Clear the Palace during phases 3 and 4.

Liver-Blood stasis, Kidney-Yang deficiency, Dampness, Spleen-Qi deficiency

Stir Field of Elixir during phases 4 and 1 (or Invigorate Blood and Stem the Flow if the period is heavy), Unicorn Pearl during phases 2 and 3 and Clear the Palace during phases 3 and 4 (tonify the Spleen with acupuncture).

Liver-Blood deficiency, Dampness, Kidney deficiency

Precious Sea during phase 2, Clear the Palace during phases 3 and 4, Unicorn Pearl or Growing Jade (according to whether there is Kidney-Yang or Kidney-Yin deficiency respectively) during phases 2 and 3.

SUMMARY OF REMEDIES ACCORDING TO FOUR PHASES

Phase 1

Phase 3

- Clear Empty Heat and Cool the Menses
- Cool the Menses
- Drain Redness
- Free Flow
- Harmonizing the Moon
- Invigorate Blood and Stem the Flow
- Restrain the Flow
- Stir Field of Elixir

Phase 2

- Growing Jade
- Nourish Yin and Restrain the Flow
- Planting Seeds
- Precious Sea
- Unicorn Pearl

- Clear the Palace
- Growing Jade
- Planting Seeds
- Unicorn Pearl
- Warm the Mansion
- Warm the Menses
- Warm the Palace

Phase 4

- Clear the Moon
- Free Flow
- Free-Flowing Sea
- Freeing Constraint
- Freeing the Moon
- Harmonizing the Moon
- Penetrating Vessel
- Stir Field of Elixir
- Warm the Mansion
- Warm the Menses
- Warm the Palace

Fig 1. The Uterus

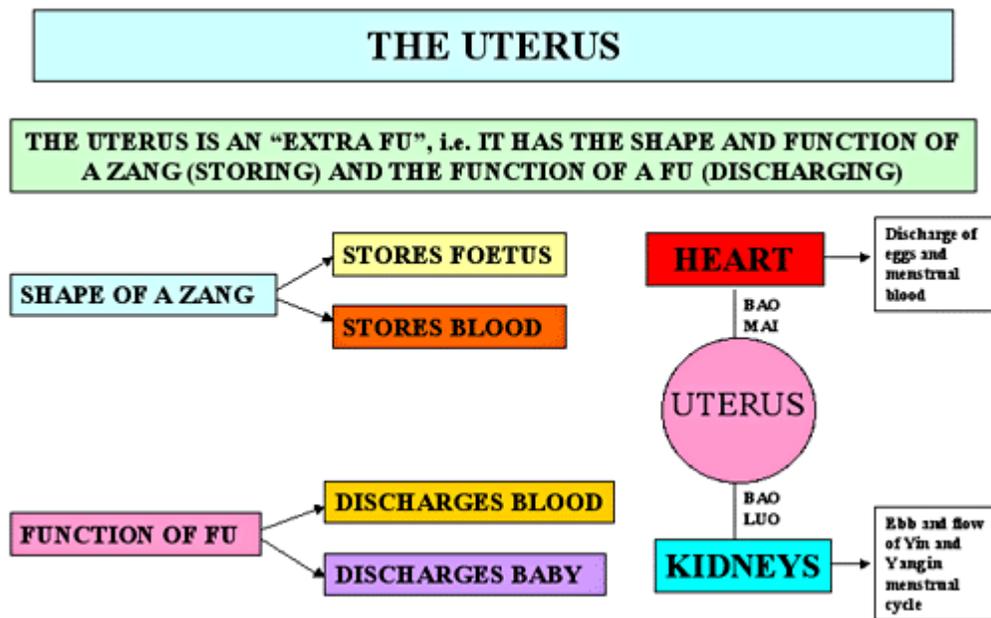


Fig 2. The 4 Phases of the Menstrual Cycle

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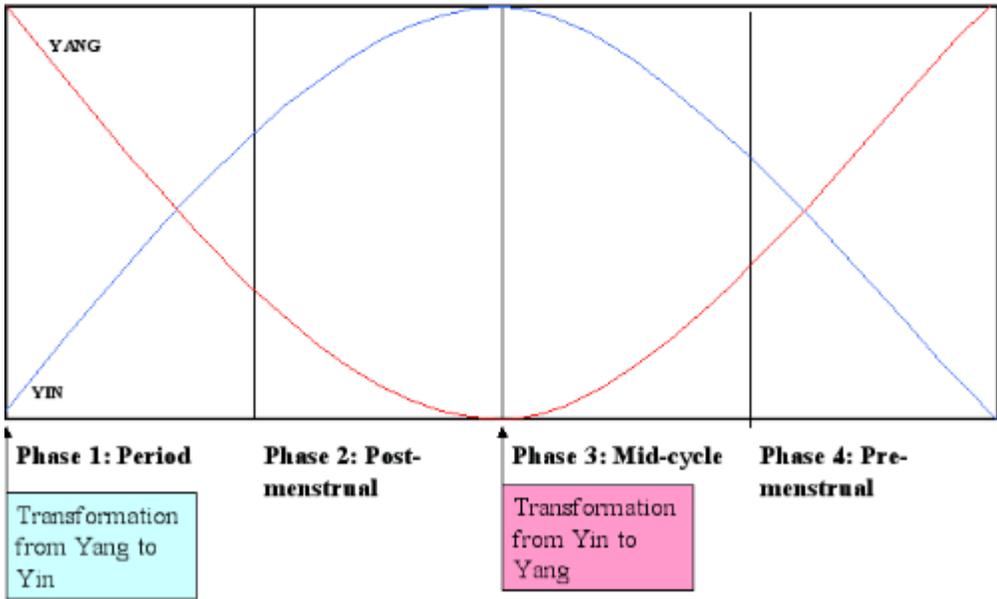
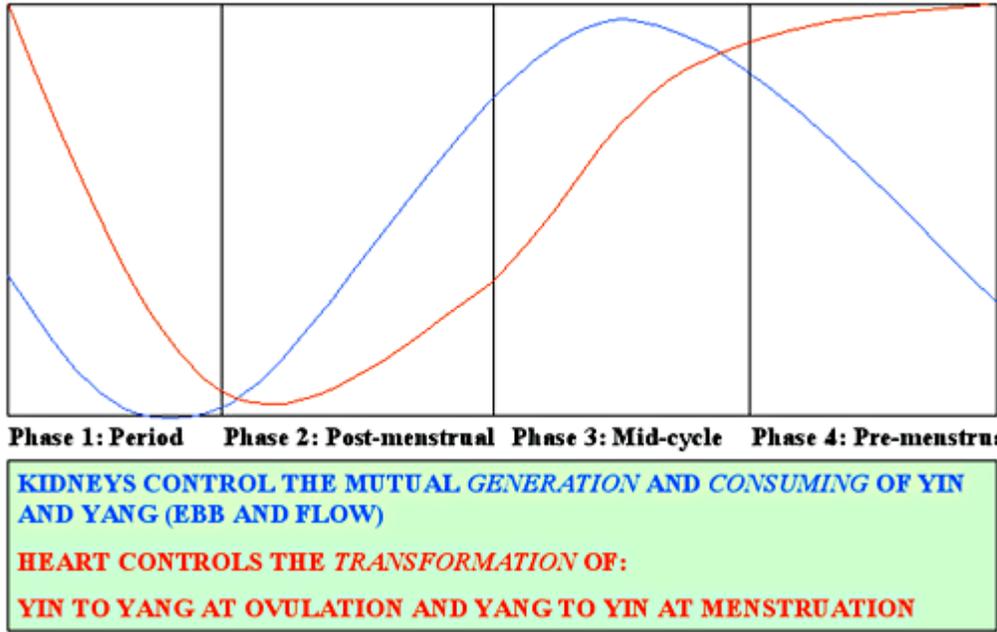


Fig 3. The 4 Phases of the Menstrual Cycle

FOUR PHASES OF THE MENSTRUAL CYCLE



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