

SHEN神

AN EXCERPT FROM HUA LU

Essential Oils and Shen

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Aromatherapy using essential oils is a primary treatment for many kinds of shen disturbances. There are many fascinating reasons for this, which are based on the relationship between the sense of smell and the limbic system, and the subsequent impacts of aroma on the endocrine and neurological systems. Specifically, fragrance has a strong and direct influence on the centers of the brain related to emotional states, memory and circadian rhythms, and is therefore a direct link to the neurochemistry underlying what TCM calls shen disturbances.

The term shen is a somewhat etheric concept compared to modern diagnostic parameters. I was taught that it had to do with the light in the eyes, which is a rather difficult quality to evaluate. It also had something to do with the person's overall emotional affect, and whether they had a positive or negative attitude and demeanor. I learned that someone with a positive and bright shen had a stronger immune system than someone whose shen was dull, so I came to understand it as a kind of psycho-neuro-immunology.

In TCM the range of shen disturbances goes from very mild expressions such as insomnia, restlessness, irritability, and anxiety to severe mental illness. We will confine this section to the more common and milder forms of disturbance. These symptom and sign patterns correspond primarily to conditions of the heart and liver.

In Chinese, there are many meanings of shen. On a macrocosmic level it can refer to meanings such as a Great Spirit, God, Creator, deities and supernatural beings. For our purposes in TCM, the meanings that are more relevant are related to consciousness, awareness, mental faculties, attention, expressions, demeanor, and so forth. We can see that there are both divine and human dimensions to the word. In TCM practice, we could say that the treatment of shen is directed toward supporting the wellbeing of the mental and emotional states.

One of the meanings of shen is related to positive or negative forces, so we could say that a healthy shen is related to positive mental and emotional states, and an unhealthy shen to unhealthy mental and emotional states. I have come to appreciate shen as being closely related to "presence," which is also a way of saying that the mind is clear, stable and lucid as opposed to distracted, confused and turbulent.

Most common shen disturbances can be summed up as falling somewhere on a spectrum between anxiety and depression, with anxiety constituting the restless, irritable and ungrounded aspects of shen, and depression constituting the devitalized, apathetic and dull states of shen. There are also a range of cognitive and behavioral disorders that are now defined by modern medicine that would also fall under the traditional description of shen disorders in TCM.

Shen disturbances can arise as a result of external stress affecting the mind and emotions, which in turn affect the organs and chi, or they can arise in consciousness from

disturbances within the organs and chi. Shen disturbances are therefore good examples of mind/body phenomenon.

There is a fascinating idea contained in the Chinese character for shen, which is comprised of the radical for worship and the radical for lightening bolt; this combination therefore suggests the ideas of lightening and spirit descending from heaven.

The radical for lightening bolt is particularly intriguing. This is in the shape of a square, divided into four quarters, with a brush stroke through the center from top to bottom. The interpretation of this symbol that I learned was that the square represented a field of earth; the four quarters represented the four directions, which therefore implied the movement of time from dawn, midday, evening and night. Through this, the lightening bolt represented either a dynamic form of energy or a vaporous spirit from heaven entering the field of earth. The overall meaning that I have understood for the character for shen, therefore, was “spirit infused within matter.”

If we use that particular definition, it begins to reveal some interesting possibilities for understanding both the health or disturbance of spirit, meaning our conscious and subconscious mind and all its memories and feelings living in matter, as well as a possible way of understanding aromatherapy, which is using the vaporous spirit of plant fragrances infused into the body during the process of breathing.

Spirit within matter, as defined by the character for shen, has many interpretations. A field of earth, such as a farm, represents the material substance of the body. Its four corners represent the four directions, and the four directions also represent the movement of the sun through day and night. Therefore, the square part of the character represents time and space, while the lightening bolt of energy or the brush stroke of vapor represents immaterial formless consciousness, which is infused within the individual body, which is where we experience time and space.

The first level of meaning we can see here is that breath is vaporous. It is also the body's connection to the chi of the sky and heavens, which becomes infused within the substance of the body with every inhalation.

It should be noted at this point that inhalation and exhalation are directly related to mental and emotional states. The most obvious example of this is the contemplative approach of watching the breath to calm the mind; although it may take some time, simply bringing the attention to the breath will gradually cause it to become slower and deeper, which in turn will have a calming effect on mental and emotional states. Conversely, when the mind is agitated the breathing becomes shallow and irregular. Shen therefore, is directly related to the cycles of the breath.

The second level of meaning is that the body is subject to continual cycles. There are the larger stages of life, of birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, middle age, and old age; in each of these stages the rhythms of the body and mind function differently, with well-known tendencies for balance or imbalance. There are yearly cycles, and seasonal cycles, which have a tremendous impact on the body and mind; a simple example is Seasonal

Affective Disorder, which is linked to the diurnal rhythm of the sun, and would be considered a depressed condition of the shen. There are monthly cycles, which have a direct and powerful influence on women's hormonal fluctuations, with corresponding influences on mental and emotional states. There are daily rhythms of waking and sleeping, which are directly affected when the shen is disturbed and vice versa. There are cycles of organ functions, such as the contraction and relaxation of the heart, which is considered the seat of shen, the expansion and contraction of the lungs and the influence of breath, the expansion and contraction of digestion, and so on. An interesting way to think of shen, therefore, is the interface between mind and matter, with mind coming under the influence of the cyclical powers of nature within the body, and abiding in the flow of those cycles in states of either comfort or discomfort.

When we define shen in this way, the link between essential oils becomes clear. The powers of botanical aromas work directly on the limbic system, which controls moods, circadian rhythms, sleep and waking cycles, emotional memories and so forth, all of which are directly related to shen as defined by TCM. The link is further strengthened when we consider that essential oils are the volatile compounds of the plants, created biologically to be released as vapor into the surrounding atmosphere, which we administer and ingest primarily through inhalation. Inhalation, in turn, is seen in the shen radical as vapor infused within matter. We can conclude, therefore, that when we are using essential oils, we are infusing the spirit of plants into the body in the same way and through the same channels that consciousness itself is maintained, which is the ongoing flow of the breath.

On a practical level, we find that the use of aromatherapy is one of the most fast-acting, nontoxic and effective ways of both elevating the mood and calming the mind. We also find that aromatherapy, especially when used on a daily basis in the environment, can have a significant impact on regulating and improving sleep cycles, on the one hand, and supporting alertness and concentration on the other. We also find that aromatherapy can be beneficial in a variety of symptoms related to hormonal imbalances and the menstrual cycle, including those related to happiness or unhappiness of the shen, again pointing to regulation of circadian rhythms through the olfactory sense.

The primary relationship between olfaction and the brain has already been discussed previously, in the section describing how fragrance bypasses the organs and tissues and enters into the deepest level of the body through the olfactory nerves and cerebral circulation. There is another important medical concept from Ayurveda which will further assist our understanding, which is "prana vata."

While there may be a concept in TCM or qigong that is a direct parallel to prana vata, I have not encountered it. Prana vata is one of the sub types of vata, which is a comprehensive term for the neurological functions. We could say that it is a combination of the chi of the breath, some of the immunological aspects of wei chi, the chi of the sense organs, the chi of the brain, and various aspects of the mind. This combination of breath, prana, nerve current and sensory information is so fundamental and important,

that it is classified as the dominant sub type of vata, and vata is the dominant dosha. Therefore, prana vata is the primary form of chi that animates the body and mind.

Prana vata is translated as the “primary air,” because of its controlling functions over the other vata sub-doshas as well as the other doshas in general. In this function, prana vata is generally correlated with the nervous system and its control over organ functions.

Prana vata is diffused throughout the head and concentrated within the brain; it could be correlated with brain’s neuro-electrical activity that is measured by an EEG. Prana vata governs the sense organs, the mind and consciousness, and assimilates sensory information, emotions, and knowledge. In this capacity, we can see that it has a direct correlation with shen disturbances.

Prana vata is strengthened and controlled by pranayama, yogic respiratory exercises. In this capacity we can see the interrelationships among breathing, neurological activity and the flow of mental activity and cognitive functions: as breathing is controlled, so are corresponding neurological and mental functions. This aspect of prana vata further clarifies its role as the vital energy that underlies the movement of thoughts and its functions of assimilating mental and emotional sensations into the deeper layers of the psyche and personality structure. Disorders of prana vata are therefore primary causes and symptoms of mental, emotional and psychological suffering, and therefore directly to shen in TCM.

Prana vata is also one of the major layers of immunological protection. In this role it could be said to be both the neurological aspect of the neuro-hormonal-immunological axis, as well as an aspect of mucus membrane immunology of the sinuses and lungs.

What is relevant to us in this study is that prana vata is the primary route of administering botanical medicine in the form of aromatic therapy; the aromatic molecules of the plants are carried on the inhalation directly into neurological channels and cerebral circulation, where they then create responses throughout the entire axis of endocrine, neurological and immunological systems.

If we combine of the Ayurvedic concept of prana vata with the TCM concept of shen, we have a very holistic description of how essential oils influence the brain, mind and emotions. From the description of shen in TCM we can learn about the specific manifestations of disturbances within mental states, moods, and cognitive functions that describe the functions of prana vata; from the description of prana vata from Ayurveda we can learn about the respiratory, olfactory and neurological channels that affect shen.

Essential Oils for Shen

Aromatherapy has a direct and intimate relationship with shen; I have described that relationship as taking place through prana vata, which we could define as the primary form of chi that carries aromas into the limbic system via olfaction, into cerebral circulation through the capillary beds of the sinuses, and into the respiratory system. Therefore, all essential oils that are administered through inhalation have a direct effect on shen through the channels and movement of this form of chi and its relationship to consciousness.

Because fragrance has such a direct link to the shen, it would appear that all essential oils would have effects on shen. In reality, there are some oils that have a more noticeable effect than others, and are known historically and through modern research to have a specific influence on consciousness. Additionally, because the stimulation of fragrance passes through the limbic system, which governs memory, pleasure and aversion, there is a highly subjective nature to the experience, which can produce different effects on different people.

For example, most people find the aroma of rose to highly pleasurable, which in turn produces a calming and uplifting effect on the shen. A few rare individuals, however, may have strongly negative emotional memories associated with the fragrance of rose, perhaps a bad allergic reaction in childhood triggered by a synthetic perfume. The subjective nature of the fragrance can therefore overwhelm the benefits to the shen.

Various fragrances can also affect us in ways other than influencing the shen. For example, inhalation of spice oils while preparing food will be more appetizing and stimulating to the digestive system; in some cases this might be directly beneficial to a depressed shen, and in other cases irrelevant. An even better example would be the antiseptic aroma of an oil such as tea tree; while it could have a mildly stimulating effect on the mind and shen, it would most likely be ineffective for benefitting most shen conditions.

There are, however, various therapeutic groups of oils can be strongly and clearly associated with different levels of prana vata and shen. These oils are known both historically and in modern research to have significant effects on the mind, emotions, sleep, relaxation, and other parameters that describe the expressions of shen. These are:

1. Oils that calm and uplift the shen and rejuvenate vitality through improved sleep and rest (relaxant anxiolytics and nervine tonic anti-depressants). These include lavender, clary sage, palmarosa, geranium, rose, and most other floral oils.
2. Oils that work directly on releasing repressed memories and emotional traumas stored in the subconscious by the limbic system. These include jatamansi, valerian and oils that induce dream activity such as clary sage.

3. Oils that uplift the mind and heart by evoking spiritual moods. These include agarwood, sandalwood, frankincense, palo santo, rose, lotus, and most exotic florals.
4. Oils that enhance cognitive functions in general, specifically concentration, learning and memory, and oils that prevent and reverse neurological degeneration. These include oils that clear the mind such as the conifers and eucalypti, those that focus and relax the mind such as lavender and melissa, those that stimulate the mind such as peppermint and rosemary.

One of the most important Ayurvedic treatments that utilizes oils and fragrance for prana vata is shirodhara, a continual cascade of warm scented oil over the head; this was described in the section on integrating essential oils into massage, acupuncture and steam treatments. The warmth and soothing sensation produced by this treatment induces deep relaxation, which could be described as a regression to a prenatal amniotic state. In this state, profound rest and rejuvenation occur within the central nervous system, which in turn produces a multitude of therapeutic benefits; in this context, it is one of the best treatments for calming and stabilizing the shen, applicable for all conditions where the mind and spirit are restless and instable. The essential oils that are typically used in this treatment include sandalwood and jatamansi, although shirodhara oils are usually complex mixtures of herbal ingredients.

We can conclude this section by saying that because of the direct route into the brain offered through the olfactory system, the inhalation of aromatic oils offers a unique and underutilized method of supporting, nourishing, calming, stabilizing and uplifting the aspects of consciousness, mind and emotions that are described by TCM as shen.

For more, buy Hua Lu, the full course on the use of essential oils according to TCM.