

Medical Herbalism

A Journal for the Clinical Practitioner

Volume 16, Number 4

Winter 2012

Herbs for the Spiritual Heart

by Paul Bergner

The concept of *organs* in traditional medical systems, such as Chinese, Indian, or Unani (Greek-Arabic) medicine differs from the Western concept of an anatomical organ. The terms of these systems describe a broad physiological function which may also include parts of the anatomy that work in conjunction with the physical organ, functions not related anatomically to the organ, and may also include psychological functions and characteristics. In traditional organ pathologies, psychological or emotional states may be disturbed, and may be brought into balance with herbal medicines, without any corresponding functional or organic pathology of an anatomical organ. The *Heart*, in Chinese or Greek/Arabic (Unani) medicine, includes the physical heart and the entire arterial system, but also the conscious mind. In Chinese medicine, nightmares or anxiety might just as likely be termed a Heart disorder as would an arrhythmia or low blood pressure. In Unani medicine, joylessness, resentment, and hatred are considered to be maladies of the Heart. In both systems, the Heart is considered the seat of the Spirit, or the conscious awareness, and herbs in these systems which are for the Heart might well be prescribed for psychological disturbance or imbalance and have no significant effect on the anatomical heart rate or rhythm.

The concept of herbs affecting disturbed emotional states or facilitating a normally relaxed centered awareness is not foreign to Western herbalism, and has a much more rich and diverse context than simply taking sedatives or nervines to relax. This may be seen especially where Western herbalism intersected historically with homeopathy. In the heyday of Eclectic herbalism, authors such as William Scudder, Herbert Webster, Harvey Felter, and Finley Ellingwood used low doses of botanicals and freely exchanged materia medica citations with the homeopaths of their day. They cited emotional states as indication for

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Case Studies: Herbal Medicine in a Nicaragua Clinic

by Paul Bergner and Tania Neubauer, ND

The following case studies are from the clinic of Natural Doctors International on the island of Ometepe in Nicaragua. Herbalists Tania Neubauer, ND and Paul Bergner saw the patients in collaboration there during January, 2011. The clinic and the naturopathic physicians who run it are integrated into the Nicaraguan health system, and can administer conventional treatments as well as therapy with herbal medicines (local and North American), supplements, homeopathy, acupuncture, manipulation, and other natural therapies. NDI has been running student training at the clinic since 2005. Students can attend and observe the clinic visits, participate collaboratively in the interview and treatment plans, and practice their physical examination and therapeutic skills up to the level of their training. The clinic is one of the few places in the world where one can see herbal medicine and other alternative therapies practiced in a full primary care medical setting, with the option of conventional medicines and hospital referral available when necessary. Even when drugs are administered, alternative therapies typically accompany them. Both acute and chronic conditions that would rarely be seen in the practice of a North American herbalist are common.

The North American Institute of Medical Herbalism has subsequently organized two more trips to this clinic in 2011 and 2012. Faculty included the regular NDI physicians, as well as an expert herbal faculty: 7Song, of the Northeast School of Botanical Medicine; Paul Bergner and Tania Neubauer, ND, of the North American Institute of Medical Herbalism; and Nicaraguan herbalist, psychologist, and flower-essence expert Natali Montoya Sequeira. Details of future trips may be found at medherb.com/nicaragua.html. What follows is a sampling of ten cases

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Herbs for the spiritual heart (from page one)

herbs, although for the heart herbs discussed here, they were mostly limited to Cactus and Crataegus. In William Boericke's classic homeopathic materia medica from the early twentieth century (Boericke) about one-sixth of the herbs are used sometimes in tincture doses. For many, mental and emotional indications are given. A listing of Boericke's indications for herbs used in undiluted tincture form, including such mental and emotional indications, can be found on the internet (Boericke). See the indication there for Mind or Head for some of the herbs. Boericke recognized mental aspects of several of the most important cardiac remedies, including:

Cactus grandiflorus

Mind: Melancholy, taciturn, sad, ill-humored. Fear of death. Anxiety.

Crataegus oxycantha

Head: Apprehensive, despondent. Very nervous and irritable, mental dullness

I was inspired to begin experimenting with Western herbs for the "spiritual heart" by two articles written by Deborah Frances ND, published in *Medical Herbalism* in 1996 (Frances), one on *Crataegus* (hawthorn) and the other on *Oplopanax* (devil's club). She recorded the effects of these herbs on the subjective mental state of patients in a series of case studies. Since that time I have experimented in my practice, but more significantly with many hundreds of low-dose herbal experiments in the student bodies of several schools where I have taught. North American Institute of Medical Herbalism faculty member Sheri

Hupfer and I have sampled and experimented with about twenty herbs over a period of five years, on our own, and also through student provings. This research culminated in a presentation on this topic at the Southwest Conference on Botanical Medicine in Tempe, Arizona in April of 2010. At the conference, I passed around the room four formulas for various aspects of the spiritual heart, to observe results on the group. Over the course of the sampling, the entire atmosphere of the room was transformed from one of a late-afternoon post-lunch sleepiness with pharmacologically-oriented mental chatter to one of a relaxed awareness. The experience was later reproduced by an

attendee at the lecture who back in her own home town reproduced the formulas exactly, and gave them in the same order to a group of herbalists. In personal correspondence, she said the same calm but heightened awareness and centered state was achieved with low doses of the formulas.

CHINESE MEDICINE

Historically a *Heart School* of Chinese Medicine arose at a time of social disruption from urbanization and increasing trade and commerce in China, when Buddhism was growing in prominence in the culture. The medical practitioners in that time observed that anxiety and mental agitation had become obstacles to cure and to the free expression of the vitality of the patients. This was seen as a disturbance of the *shen*, the Spirit or consciousness that resides in the heart. They observed that the stressed patients were too agitated to make wise health and lifestyle decisions. They devised sedative formulas, not to be used on an ongoing basis, but to help an individual establish balance and make wiser decisions about their lives and behavior. Most of these formulas that we have today are heavily sedative.

UNANI MEDICINE

Arabic practitioners in the Greek tradition recognized the importance of the spiritual heart, and developed herbal, dietetic, and constitutional strategies to restore balance to the agitated heart. They describe pathologies of the *pneuma* of the heart, a concept identical to the *shen* in Chinese medicine. For instance, the *pneuma* could be depressed, or could express with too much vigor and heat. Hakim Ibn Sina (Avicenna) described the herbal action *exhilarant* -- a category of herbs said to arouse the *pneuma* of the heart and uplift the vital centers of the heart and brain. See the accompanying article on page four. A number of exhilarants are described in his classic *Canon of Medicine*, and more in *al-adwiyat al Qalbia*. a treatise on *cardiac herbs* (Hameed).

I do not present the herbs and formulas in this article as a substitutes or additions to the formal Chinese Heart School or the Unani remedies, although there is significant overlap with the Unani heart materia medica. But our experiments here were inspired by the same historical kind of circumstances that gave rise to the Chinese Heart School. Today, as then, the sense of loss of center, loss of tradition and sense of place, lack

"When the heart is not healthy, the entire system is diseased"

--an aphorism of Unani medicine

Avicenna and the spiritual Heart

Greek medicine was developed to a higher degree by Arab physicians from about 800 to 1400 AD. Prominent among these physicians was Hakim Ibn Sina (Avicenna), who introduced concepts of breath and its connection to the spiritual heart as a center of vitality. He is most famous worldwide for his five volume *Canon of Medicine*, which was once a standard medical work from the borders of China to the far reaches of Europe, and is still in use in South and Central Asia. He also published a tract specifically on diseases of the heart and herbs affecting it. However, his *Al adwiyat al Qalbia* (Hameed) covers topics and remedies unheard of in the practice of a modern cardiologist. The treatise focuses on the spiritual heart, and is as much a dissertation on psychology as it is on physical medicine. From the preface of the editor: "He has held the heart as the source of spiritual disease involving good and evil, joy and grief, love and hatred, ill-will and enmity, hatred and jealousy, anger and cunning, etc. These, according to him, are caused by the structure of the heart and its fluids and humours which can be rectified only by an expert physician." (Hameed). Ibn Sina describes one of the primary presentations of diseases of the spiritual heart as the inability to experience joy.

Ibn Sina describes therapeutic approaches to restoring balance in the heart, based on balancing the constitution, building or correcting the composition of the blood, correcting humoral imbalances, or purging substances which inhibit the expression of vitality. Also in the treatise, Ibn Sina introduces the herbal action of *exhilarant* – a substance which arouses the vitality in the spiritual heart and inclines the spirit toward joy – within a materia medica of sixty-three herbs which can affect on the heart. In ad-

dition to exhilarants are herbs which strengthen the heart, which moderate heat or over-excitability, or which purge substances which can cause humoral obstructions. Ibn Sina describes overall methods of treatment, including adjusting the diet and the environment to avoid aggravation of imbalances in the spiritual heart, such as melancholy or rancor. He also gives a group of formulas, with suggestions for modification for various constitutions. Because a large percentage of the herbs in the formulas are not available today, these formulas would be difficult to apply.

Some exhilarants from Ibn Sina

Basil (*Ocimum basilicum*, *O. sanctum*)

Cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia*)

Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*)

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*)

Fir (*Abies alba*)

Frankincense (*Boswellia glabra*)

Lavender (*Lavandula officinalis*)

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*)

Lemon peel (*Citrus medica*)

Mint (*Mentha arvensis*)

Rose (*Rose damascena*)

Saffron (*Crocus sativa*)

Sandalwood (*Santalum alba*)

From Ibn Sina's *al-adwiyat al Qalbia* (Hameed)

of safety, fundamental heartbreak and loss, hurried anxiety and the inability to tap the deeper wisdom of the heart are predominant. These make up a dominant form of subjective suffering which is in many cases overlooked because it is so endemic in the society. Now, as then, this state of the agitated heart in many cases presents the dominant obstacle to cure – if the patient could find their center and tap their own wisdom and inner vision, many of their lifestyle imbalances would be corrected by the resulting insights. In a clinical setting I have used these remedies in stages during

a long interview, and toward the end, after discussing the case and options, simply asked the client, "What do you think is most important for you to do now?" Often they know exactly what course to take for their recovery, what needs to be let go of or added in their life. So the points below are derived and inspired by the approaches to the spiritual heart in Chinese and Unani medicines, but to not duplicate them, with some new concepts and materia medica arising from our experience.

THE SPIRITUAL HEART IN 21ST CENTURY URBAN LIFE

So in our own Western language and paradigm, we can say of the spiritual heart:

- It is the foundation and seat of the conscious mind, of consciousness of the external or the internal senses.
- It has boundaries and a heart-protector aspect that establishes safety from abuse.
- The protector aspect also may influence personal integrity and courage.
- It expresses, when on safe ground, feelings of love, kindness, compassion, and connectedness.
- It possesses a way of knowing and wisdom without logic or mental activity.
- It senses truth and can use this sense to receive spiritual inspiration and guidance.

Below we describe some herbs that affect these different facets of the heart.

UNANI EXHILARANTS

Here is a list of *exhilarants* from a contemporary Unani text from Pakistan (Usmanghani). See also a longer list on page four. Some classical Unani herbal pairing examples are included here.

- *Cinnamomum cassia*, combine with Valeriana; heart and brain
- *Cinnamomum zeylanicum (verum)*, combine with *Coriandrum*
- *Centella asiatica*, combine with *Coriandrum*; all vital organs
- *Ocimum basilicum, sanctum*, combine with *Viola*
- *Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*, combine with small amount of *Piper nigrum*

A sample exhilarant tincture formula:

<i>Centella asiatica</i>	2 parts
<i>Ocimum basilicum</i> or <i>sanctum</i>	2 parts
<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>	2 parts
<i>Cinnamomum cassia</i>	1 part
<i>Viola odorata</i>	1 part

Dose: 3-5 drops, repeat as desired.

During a proving at the NAIMH, a student's mother came at the end of a class, and we invited her to sit down and take the above herbs and dose, then asked

her how she felt. After 20-30 seconds of savoring the herbs, she said "delighted."

HEART CENTERING, RELAXING

Dose is important. Most of these herbs are sedative in higher doses. In low doses, 1-5 drops, they relax without dulling the consciousness.

- *Leonurus cardiaca* motherwort
- *Lycopus virginicus* bugleweed
- *Paeonia officinalis* peony root
- *Verbena spp.* vervain
- *Pulsatilla spp.* pasque flower
- *Populus spp. flos* poplar flowers
- *Succinum* resin (amber, as small doses of powder)

Sample formulas:

Tincture

Leonurus cardiaca
Pulsatilla patens, spp.
Paeonia alba
Equal parts

Powder

Rosa rose flower petals
Leonurus leaf and plant
Succinum resin powder
Equal parts rolled with honey into pea-sized pills.

HEART PROTECTION

Tonic without overstimulation in low dose forms.

Crataegus spp. hawthorn
Rosa damascena rose petals
Oplopanax horridum devil's club

Sample formula

Tincture

Crataegus spp.
Rosa damascena
Oplopanax horridum
Leonurus cardiaca

One student ending a long term relationship took a formula of herbs with the heart protector aspect, and then engaged in a conversation with her soon-to-be ex-partner. To her surprise, instead of just feeling pro-

tected, she expressed freely many of her perceptions of what she thought were problems in the relationship. The protector aspect established enough feeling of centered integrity that she could express herself honestly.

Another woman relates her story: "I had experienced a deep heart wound from rejection by someone I had fallen in love with. I took the Heart Protector formula (*Oplopanax*, *Crataegus*, *Rosa*) on the day of a particularly painful final conversation with this person, and for a few weeks after I took it daily. I felt strong, radiant, sure that my boundaries were correct. About three weeks later I began to doubt myself, worried I had not handled the situation well, guilty and rejected. I realized I had stopped taking the formula for a few days! I started again and my previous confidence resumed."

HEART PERCEPTION, WISDOM

More relaxant in effect

Stachys betonica wood betony
Scutellaria lateriflora (tincture) scullcap
 (Skullcap decoction is more sedative, the tincture more simply relaxant.)

More tonic in effect

Ocimum basilicum, sanctum basil
 (species used interchangeably in Unani medicine)
Centella asiatica gotu kola

Example formula

Stachys betonica
Centella asiatica
Ocimum basilicum, sanctum
Rosa damascena
Coriandrum sativum

MIXED FORMULAS

Formulas for the various aspects of the heart can be combined to affect the whole heart "system." The proportions of herbs in each category can be changed, by either the number of herbs from that category or the number of parts, to emphasize one or several aspects. For some simple pairs and triplets, this would look like:

Crataegus 2 parts heart protecting
Leonurus 1 part heart centering
 Emphasizes the protective aspect and is more tonic

Leonurus 1 part centering
Pulsatilla 1 part centering
Crataegus 1 part protecting
Scutellaria 1 part wisdom

This formula emphasizes centering and is more relaxant.

More complex formulas

Pulsatilla 2 parts centering
Leonurus 2 parts centering
Rosa 2 parts protecting
Ocimum 1 part wisdom
Cinnamomum 1 part exhilarant

This formula emphasizes relaxant effects.

Another formula:

Crataegus 3 parts protecting
Oplopanax 3 parts protecting
Leonurus 2 parts centering
Scutellaria 1 part wisdom
Cinnamomum 1 part exhilarant
Coriandrum 1 part exhilarant

A formula with strong heart-protection, but balanced by the other herbs.

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