

The Seven Dhatus Part VI: The Majja Dhatu: A Closer Look

Advanced Ayurvedic Theory

Introduction

Majja means marrow as in bone-marrow (asthi-majja). However, the term has become synonymous with nervous system which like bone marrow, is encased within bone. The skull is the casing of the brain. The vertebra are the casing of the spinal cord. While the brain and spinal cord make up the central nervous system, the Majja dhatu is associated with the entire nervous system. The nervous system and the bone marrow are treated as homologous structures in ayurveda^{i[1]}.

In the physical body, Majja dhatu is formed as posaka (unstable) asthi dhatu flows through the majjavaha srota into the majja dhara kala and is digested by the majjagni. In addition to the formation of the marrow, the sclera and the sclerotic fluids of the eye are formed. These are the updhatu of the production of majja dhatu. The waste products (malas) of this metabolic process are eye secretions.

The health of the majja dhatu is dependent upon the state of the majjagni residing within the majjadhara kala. When the kala is infiltrated by vata dosha, agni becomes variable. When it is infiltrated by pitta dosha, agni typically become increased. When kapha dosha infiltrates the kala, agni becomes low. The state of agni determines the quantity and quality of the tissues that are formed,

Kapha dosha vitiation complex of the kala results in excessive tissue formation though it is of low quality. Majja dhatu (nervous system) becomes denser and thicker resulting in slowing down the movement of nerve impulses (prana). This is observable in the mind as slower processing of sensory information and in the body as slower response times. Should kapha dosha increase further, not only might it slow down the flow prana, it may block or obstruct its flow. This results in aberrant flow. Symptoms of aberrant pranic flow secondary to a blockage mimic those of vata dosha and are often misdiagnosed as a primary vata imbalances.

Pitta dosha vitiation results in minimal to moderate tissue formation. The tissue formed is highly efficient. Prana moves effectively through the nervous system. Processing and response times quick. However when pitta dosha increases too much the tissue formed becomes overly heated and prone to inflammation and excessive metabolism. Inflammation results in neuritis. Excessive metabolism results in burning out the protective structures surrounding and within the nerves. Deterioration of the myelin sheath as occurs in multiple sclerosis and post viral syndromes are examples. Within the brain, neurological structures may burn out as well. This occurs in some cases of Parkinson's disease and dementia.

Vitiation of vata dosha results in irregular tissue formation and the tissue that is formed is of low quality and fragile. Prana may move excessively or irregularly. When formation is minimal the stabilizing factors within the nerve are diminished and prana move quickly without restraint. Reactions are often sudden, too quick and not measured. Thus they may be dramatic. When formation is irregular, prana may also move in an irregular manner appearing at times to be excessive and other times deficient. This results hyper and hypo activity. In addition motion may be jerky as occurs in tics and some tremors. Long term vata imbalance ultimately results in drying and thinning of the tissues of the nervous system resulting in an inability of prana to move effectively. This appears like a kapha imbalance as flow of prana is deficient. Its inability to move however is not due to obstruction but to damaged structure. Discerning this condition from a primary kapha

condition requires observing the broader effects of the dosha upon the body.

In order to produce majja dhatu the primary elements that must be taken in the proper balance are air and water. The balance of air regulates the flow of nerve impulses. Water provides a counter balance to air, protecting the nerve against excessive motion and agitation. The brain as well the myelin that surrounds the structure of the nerve consists largely of fat. It is composed primarily of the element water and has kapha-like characteristics.

Pathology and the Majja Dhatu

Following accumulation and aggravation in the mahavaha srota (digestive system), the doshas overflow into the rasa and raktavaha srotas before relocating into the majjavaha srota and majja dhatu. While any dosha can relocate into the majja dhatu, pathologies of the nervous system are termed Vata Vyadhi meaning a disease of vata nature. Thus, nerve pathologies cause symptoms commonly associated with vata including pain and alterations of motion. Even still, vata dosha is not always the cause of the problem. Vitiating of pitta dosha leads to inflammation and over a long period of time can burn out the myelin and nerve tissue. Vitiating of kapha dosha may slow down nerve conduction, decrease the rate of processing information or cause blockages resulting in the aberrant flow of nerve impulses. Ama when present further complicates the condition.

Psychology and the Majja Dhatu

On a psychological level majja provides our sense of fulfillment, filling the void that we experience within. When majja dhatu is healthy, there is a sense of fullness and completion. When deficient, there exists a hollow feeling of emptiness. In excess, there is the feeling of stagnation that comes with being too full. Neither the body nor mind wants to move or work. There is a loss of motivation.

In the subtle body, the majja dhatu is dependent upon the flow of prana primarily through svadhistana and anahata chakras. Through these chakras the qualities of water and air circulate respectively.

Evaluating the Majja Dhatu

The state of the majja dhatu may be assessed in many ways. While the nerves themselves can not ordinarily be seen, their function can be easily tested using standard Western neurological tests. Without western medical training, the health of the majja dhatu can also be inferred by observing the quantity of exudate produced from the eyes in the morning, the color of the sclera and the general luminosity of the eyes. This latter criterion is based on the subtle perception of the practitioner.

Exudate that is dry and crusty is indicated of vata dosha imbalance. A large quantity of oily or mucousy exudate is indicative of a kapha imbalance. Yellow exudate which may be a little oily is indicative of the involvement of pitta dosha.

Evaluation of the color of sclera is important as well. A dark, dull, gray indicates that vata has become vitiated. A yellow sclera indicates that pitta is vitiated. A white sclera that is dull indicates that kapha is vitiated.

In observing the general luminosity of the eyes, a decrease in luminosity indicates the kapha has become vitiated. The eyes appear cloudy and dull. Interest is present but processing occurs slowly. An increase in luminosity is indicative of pitta vitiation. The eyes appear to intensely interested, deeply engaged and too highly focused. Vitiating of vata dosha causes the eyes to appear vacant, lacking in attention and real interest.

Proper Treatment of the Majja Dhatu

Healing the majja dhatu means restoring the proper balance of the qualities of water and air within the dhatu. This process begins with taking the qualities of the elements in through the senses and then properly digesting them. While dietary intake is always the most important factor in healing the physical body, the nervous system is particularly sensitive to input from all of the other senses as well.

Diet and the Majja Dhatu

When vata dosha has entered the majja dhatu the best treatment is to increase the quantity of water element in the diet. Water is found in the largest amounts in moist, oily foods and in those that are the most nourishing. Milk and ghee are the two most important substances. Milk and ghee restore deficient majja dhatu. Milk should always be taken warm with spices added to assure proper digestion. Ghee may be added to the milk or to other foods. In order to maximize the oily quality, the four fats are often recommended. The four fats are: ghee, bone marrow, sesame oil and muscle fat. Either ghee by itself or the four fats may be utilized as an anupana for the intake of herbs that nourish the majja dhatu.

When pitta dosha has entered the majja dhatu, the best treatment is to cool the dhatu utilizing the sweet taste. The sweet taste is not only cool but also nourishing. Once again, increasing milk and ghee consumption are outstanding choices for dietary treatment. Sesame oil should not be taken however as it is too warming for regular use. Although the bitter taste is also cooling and pacifies pitta dosha, it should be used with caution as it can reduce the dhatu and aggravate vata dosha.

When kapha dosha has entered the majja dhatu, the best treatment is to increase the flow of prana and decrease the qualities of water utilizing the bitter and pungent tastes. Raw vegetables, particularly leafy greens are best. In general the diet should be very light and dry and foods should be well spiced. Fasting is often appropriate and patients with a kapha imbalance may fast on light vegetables juices taken with spices for several days to a week.

Exercise Yoga and the Majja Dhatu

The flow of prana is directly related to the motion of the body and the mind. As motion increases, so does the flow of prana. Thus, when vata is vitiated in the majja dhatu, patients should not engage in activities that involve significant movement such as running, tennis, racquet ball and so on. Slower activities such as swimming and yoga better support the healing process. As there are many forms of asana, slower and gentler approaches are best. However, if the imbalance is severe, patients should avoid all activity. Slower approaches to activities are also best for pitta dosha when it settles in the majja dhatu. Slower, gentler approaches are cooling as well as stabilizing. When kapha dosha is vitiated in the majja dhatu activity should be increased. Mindful movements are always preferred in ayurveda. As such, yoga is the favored approach. Of course, benefit can also be gained from other mindful activities such as running. However, mindfulness is difficult to achieve during competitive games such as tennis and racquetball. Asana practices that are more active and flowing are preferred over gentle, slower practices.

Meditation, Chanting and the majja Dhatu

The goal of yoga, according to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali is union with the divine through bringing stillness to the flow of prana in the mind and body. For this purpose, meditation is the most important and effective tool. As the movement of the mind becomes more focused the flow of prana becomes slower and more directed toward the object of meditation. Traditionally, the object is divine consciousness. One side effect of this process is stress reduction. Stress reduction and a calmer mind support the healing of vata imbalances within the majja dhatu. Thus patients with vata type neurological disorders should meditate. However, those patients who are too depleted should use caution as excessive meditation increases the light quality and brings about greater purification. Meditation is strongly recommended when pitta or kapha doshas are the causative factor in the condition. Note however that when kapha is the causative factor meditation must be balanced with activity. Meditation without the proper balance of activity will cause those with a kapha imbalance to become more lethargic decreasing the flow of prana and compromising the quality of the meditative experience. Singing kirtan and chanting generally increases vata dosha and decrease kapha dosha through specific mantras may alter this effect. When vata is strongly vitiated it is best to minimize vocal expression. When kapha is vitiated, it is best to increase vocal expression. The bija mantra yum increases the flow of the qualities of air through the anahata chakra. The bija mantra vum increases the flow of the water qualities through svadhistana chakra.

Herbs and the Majja Dhatu:

When vata has entered the majja dhatu, the patient should be given herbs with a tonifying and sedating action. Among the best of these herbs are ashwaganda and shank pushpi. Other beneficial herbs when combined properly include jatamamsi and bala.

When pitta has vitiated the majja dhatu, the best herbs are cooling and sedating. Among the best herbs are brahmi, shank pushpi and kappikachu. Brahmi is best when ama is present as its light and bitter nature will not increase ama. Shank pushpi and kappikachu are best when no ama is present as they are heavier and moist. Other beneficial herbs include: Skull cap, vidari kand and chrysanthemum flower. St. Johns Wort and oatstraw.

When kapha enters the majja dhatu, the patient should be given herbs with light, mobile qualities that purify the tissue. One of the most renowned herbs for this is calamus. Other beneficial herbs include bayberry, tulsi and sage. .

Lifestyle and the Healing of the Majja Dhatu

Lifestyle is the primary cause of disease and its correction is the most important component of its cure. No where is this more obvious than when the majja dhatu has become vitiated. When vata is vitiated, the patient should get more rest and avoid stressful situations. Travel should be minimized. Daily routines should be established that are practiced with consistency. It is best if a friend is near by to provide added support and ease the burdens of daily life. When pitta is vitiated, the patient should get more rest. It is particularly important to avoid conflict and competition. The patient should be educated to understand that excessive focus will over heat the nervous system. Thus, activities that are light hearted or fun should be encouraged. When kapha is vitiated an active lifestyle is called for that includes less sleep and greater engagement in the world. Spontaneity should be supported. Regular routines should be adopted so long as those activities are active and engaging.

Dr. Marc Halpern is the founder and President of the California College of Ayurveda. An internationally respected expert in the field of Ayurvedic medicine and Yoga Therapy, Dr. Halpern received the award for Best Ayurvedic Physician from the Indian Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Dr. A. Ramdas. He is a co-founder of the National Ayurvedic Medical Association and the California Association of Ayurvedic Medicine. He is on the advisory board of Light on Ayurveda Journal in the United States and the Journal of Research and Education in Indian Medicine in Varansi, India. He can be reached at www.ayurvedacollege.com [2] or drh@ayurvedacollege.com [3]. Or by phone at 1-866 -541- 6699

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