The Seven Dhatus Part II: Rakta Dhatu

Advanced Ayurvedic Theory

Rakta dhatu refers to the primary fire of the body. The word rakta means colored as well as reddened. Depending upon its usage, it can also mean impassioned. Each of these meanings has important implications from the perspective of health and healing. In the physical body, rakta refers directly to the blood, specifically the red blood cells, and indirectly to the tendons and the bile.

Rakta dhatu is more than blood. It is the carrier of the fire that invigorates the body and mind. As such, when rakta dhatu is healthy, a person feels energized with a healthy passion for life. When rakta dhatu is in excess, heat in the body increases, the tissues of the body experience inflammation, and the mind experiences greater intensity and sharper focus. When rakta dhatu is deficient, the heat in the body decreases and the tissues of the body become cold and stiff while the mind loses its sharpness and focus.

The rakta dhatu, being made up primarily of the element fire, has similar qualities. It is hot, light, dry, hard, unstable, rough, flowing, clear, subtle and sharp. These qualities are very similar to pitta dosha which is made up of mostly fire and a little water. Thus, the health of rakta dhatu plays an important role in determining the health of pitta dosha. In the formation of the dhatus, pitta dosha is the mala (waste product) produced by the formation of rakta dhatu. Rakta dhatu also has a special relationship to the liver. The liver is the site of origin of the raktavaha srota - the channel through which the unstable form of rasa (posya rasa dhatu) must pass prior to the formation of rakta. When the rakta dhatu is overheated, so too is the posya rasa dhatu. As a result, the liver and spleen become overheated and possibly enlarged. This is what occurs during hepatitis.

When rakta dhatu is depleted, the qualities of pitta dosha and fire diminish. A person feels cold, the skin loses its luster becoming pale or dusty gray, and coldness causes the body to hold on to heat by becoming constipated and by reducing urination and sweat. In the mind, depletion of the rakta dhatu leads to dullness, and difficulty processing and understanding new information. This often leads to confusion and misunderstandings.

When the rakta dhatu is in excess, the qualities of pitta dosha and fire increase. A person feels warmer. As heat builds up in the body, the body tries to release the heat. This occurs in several ways. One way is through the skin. Vasodilatation brings blood to the surface in order to cool it off. This makes the skin appear redder. At first, the skin takes on a nice luster but if the heat continues to build, rashes develop. Vasodilatation may also be seen in the eyes which also become reddened. The body tries to release the excess heat along with the malas of the body. The frequency of bowel movements increases and the stools may become loose. The frequency of urination also increases. The most noticeable sign of the body trying to reduce excess heat, however, is often experienced as an increase in sweat. If the excess heat can not be adequately removed, it will result in burning sensations within the mucous membranes and eventually inflammation and fever. As the heat spreads, any tissue or organ can be affected.

It is vitiation of the pitta dosha that causes the rakta dhatu to increase. This is often a confusing concept as pitta dosha, being light, depletes the rest of the dhatus. Pitta dosha, however, increases the rakta dhatu due to their similar natures. The fire of pitta increases the fire of the rakta dhatu. An increase in the rakta dhatu results in feeling warmer and more intense. Lifestyle factors that increase the rakta dhatu are those that increase pitta dosha such as intellectual study, focus and exercise as well as a diet that is too hot and spicy. While pitta dosha vitiation usually increases the rakta dhatu when it goes on for too long or becomes too intense, it will eventually burn out the dhatu. This results in a decrease in the dhatu. The body becomes unable to hold onto the heat – feels cold and becomes easily fatigued. Most practitioners equate this with a vata imbalance. However, it

The Seven Dhatus Part II: Rakta Dhatu

Published on CA College of Ayurveda (http://www.ayurvedacollege.com)

is the result of burn out.

When the rakta dhatu has increased, all of the activities of the body become more intense. In women, menstrual flow intensifies becoming very heavy but only for a few days. A person's mood intensifies and small things seem very important. One's sense of dharma intensifies but the imbalance leads to a state of mind in which the end justifies the means. Thus, integrity is often compromised for the sake of accomplishment. As heat builds throughout the body, there is joint and skin inflammation, redness of the eyes and even the blood vessels themselves become inflamed. Fever is possible. Many of these symptoms occur within the family of Rheumatic or Connective Tissue Disorders. These diseases result in an auto-immune response that generates inflammation. It is the pitta dosha that increases the rakta dhatu and the rakta dhatu that increases the pitta dosha. The two are inseparable. Thus, whenever pitta dosha is vitiated, the rakta dhatu must be treated and visa versa.

Vata vitiation results in a decrease of the rakta dhatu. The light nature of vata dosha can reduce the red blood cells count. The cold nature of vata dosha reduces the fire-carrying capacity of the rakta dhatu. As a result of depletion, the body becomes both cold and fatigued. Activities that reduce the rakta dhatu are those that vitiate vata dosha such as irregular eating habits and skipping meals. These habits result in malabsorption and malnutrition.

Vitiation of kapha dosha has an interesting effect on the rakta dhatu. Due to its heavy and gross nature, kapha dosha increases the rakta dhatu. This may result in a greater number or size of the red blood cells. However, due to the cold nature of kapha dosha, the quantity of heat carried by the rakta dhatu decreases. Thus, the patient experiences a lack of energy (sluggishness) as well as a feeling of being cold. Lifestyle factors that vitiate kapha dosha within the rakta dhatu include laziness, a lack of exercise, a disinterest in intellectual exploration and a diet that is bland.

In the subtle body, the qualities of fire flow through the manipura chakra and the pingala nadi bringing about strong and intense drives and feelings including: passion, focus, reason and logic. The state of the rakta dhatu is tied to the flow of prana through these energetic channels. When rakta dhatu is healthy, these feelings and drives are well balanced within the constitutional nature of the individual. As rakta dhatu becomes depleted the flow of fiery qualities through the nadi and chakra decrease and there is a decrease in these feelings and drives. When rakta dhatu is in excess, these feelings and drives increase. However, as they increase beyond their constitutional balance, they become tainted by the attachments and the desires of the ego.

Healing the rakta dhatu means restoring the proper quantity and quality of fire in the body and mind. The proper quantity is based upon the constitutional tendency of the individual. Those with more pitta in their constitution will naturally have more rakta dhatu. This makes depletion less likely and excess more likely. Those with more of a vata constitution tend to have a naturally lower amount of rakta dhatu and are most susceptible to depletion. Those with a kapha constitution tend to have an adequate quantity of rakta dhatu. However, the dhatu tends to be of poorer quality.

The quantity and quality of rakta dhatu depends upon the intake of the fire element. Food must first be digested by the main digestive fire (jatharagni). This produces ahara rasa which is then digested by rasagni to produce rasa dhatu and its related tissues. A portion of the rasa dhatu is then digested by the raktagni to produce rakta dhatu and its related tissues. When rakta agni is functioning properly and when it has received adequate rasa for transformation, the rakta produced will be of an ideal quantity and of the highest quality. When the raktagni is low, a greater amount of rakta is produced. However, this is of poor quality. This occurs when kapha is vitiated. When raktagni is too high, less rakta is produced but it is supercharged in the sense that it is very hot. This is what occurs when pitta is vitiated. When raktagni is variable, too little rakta is produced and it is of poor quality. This is what occurs when vata dosha is vitiated. Thus, the care of the rakta dhatu is dependent upon the health of raktagni. Since the health of the rakta agni is partially dependent upon the health of jatharagni, attention must be paid to both agnis in order to restore health.

In order to evaluate the health of the rakta dhatu, the blood should be evaluated. The red blood cell count tells of the quantity of rakta dhatu that is present. Cellular morphology and the levels of hemoglobin are indicators of its quality. Of course, not all ayurvedic practitioners have the ability to

The Seven Dhatus Part II: Rakta Dhatu

Published on CA College of Ayurveda (http://www.ayurvedacollege.com)

order blood tests or have been trained to read them. And, even if they were, blood tests alone are insufficient to tell the health of the rakta dhatu as the dhatu is more than blood. Some imbalances do not show up in the blood tests but can be observed in other ways. Examination of the rakta dhatu should include an examination of the complexion of an individual, palpation of the liver for size and tenderness and observation of the sclera of the eyes for red or yellow discoloration. The tendons of the body should be palpated and the practitioner should inquire if there is a history of tendonitis. The tendons are an upadhatu of the formation of the rakta dhatu. Tendonitis is one indicator of pitta vitiation within the rakta dhatu. While taking the case history, the practitioner should also inquire as to whether there is a recent history of abnormal bleeding from any part of the body. When pitta enters the rakta dhatu, bleeding in the body tends to increase. While many of these indicators are found in the late stages of rakta dhatu vitiation by pitta dosha, the earliest indicator is often just feeling warmer than usual or becoming more sensitive to heat.

Source URL: http://www.ayurvedacollege.com/articles/drhalpern/Rakta%20Dhatu