



Essential Oils and the Fifteen Sub-doshas

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The objective of this article is twofold. The first is to introduce the fifteen sub-doshas as described by Ayurvedic medicine, which are the anatomical and physiological subdivisions of the three primary doshas of vata, pitta, and kapha. The second is to describe the categories of essential oils that are related to each of the sub-doshas. By describing the functions of each sub-dosha and then correlating essential oils that have direct therapeutic effects on that sub-dosha, we gain an understanding of how the oils affect interrelated systems of organs, channels, and tissues, and therefore know the strengths and weaknesses of using aromatherapy and aromatic plants for different conditions.

Although many oils can be easily correlated with a specific sub-dosha, it is important to remember that essential oils are composed of complex mixtures of molecular compounds, each of which in turn has a wide range of therapeutic actions. It can be accurately stated that every essential oil has multiple therapeutic functions to varying degrees; if these functions are not currently recognized, it is only a matter of time before they are discovered and confirmed by experience and research. Therefore, the assignment of a specific oil to a specific sub-dosha is based on its generally recognized primary therapeutic action, but is not inclusive of every aspect of the oil.

Likewise, each sub-dosha has multiple levels of functions, from the most physical levels of anatomical and physiological activities to the most subtle and innermost activities of the mind and consciousness. The sub-doshas of vata, for example, are closely related to both the breath and the nervous system, but also function at the cognitive level to assimilate sensory information, and at the psychological level to integrate the personality structure and activate the will. Furthermore, these currents of subtle “air” are also said to operate within the realm of spirit, linking consciousness to this present physical incarnation, carrying consciousness into the next incarnation, activating karmic propensities, and other activities that would be considered related to mystical dimensions.

Although aromatic plants have always been ceremonially and ritualistically associated with these subtle realms of consciousness, this article will explore only the most external of the anatomical and physiological sub-doshic activities, with some comments about their mental, emotional and psychological aspects. This article will touch only on the general therapeutic functions of the oils upon the sub-doshas, as the specific pathologies and treatments of each sub-dosha are too numerous to list.

Essential Oils and the Five Vatas

Prana Vata

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 could be 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.

Prana vata is also called the “forward moving air.” In this role it carries food and air into the body; its inward motion governs inhalation and swallowing, while its outward motion is active when sneezing, spitting, and belching.

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.

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.

Prana vata and essential oils

Aromatherapy has a direct and intimate relationship with prana vata; this vata is the primary force carrying the neurological effects of aromas via olfaction into the limbic system, 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 prana vata.

Various therapeutic groups of oils can be associated with different level of prana vata. These are:

1. Oils with respiratory benefits, including mucolytic, expectorant, antitussive, and decongestant functions. These include the conifer oils such as spruce, pine, fir, and juniper; eucalyptus oils; mid to high potency antimicrobial oils such as tea tree, niaouli, oregano, thyme, and tulsi; and resin oils such as frankincense and palo santo.

2. 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.
3. 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.
4. Oils that uplift the mind and heart by evoking spiritual moods. These include agarwood, sandalwood, frankincense, palo santo, rose, lotus, and most exotic florals.
5. Oils that enhance cognitive functions in general, specifically concentration, learning and memory, and oils that prevent and reverse neurological degeneration. These include lavender, peppermint, rosemary, and melissa.

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. 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. The essential oils that are typically used include sandalwood and jatamansi.

Udana vata

Udana vata is the “upward moving air” that governs exhalation and speech. Its outer physiological energy is located throughout chest and centered in throat, while its inner subtle function supports memory, strength, effort, and will; it is linked to the powers of discrimination and self-expression.

Udana vata and essential oils

Udana vata is directly related to aromatherapy. As the upward force of exhalation it is benefited by oils that treat the sinuses, lungs and throat. Specifically, all decongestant and mucolytic oils such as eucalypti, conifers, and white sage will directly benefit udana vata when used for inhalation, chest compresses and steam baths. Additionally, the decongestant and mucolytic effects of aromatic herbs taken as hot infusions or decoctions, such as ginger, thyme, oregano, mints, and other common remedies for colds, coughs and respiratory congestion, work on udana vata as they are exhaled after the first phases of digestion.

Udana vata also functions to support the mind and memory; it might be considered the upward circulatory power of breath that oxygenates the brain. Oils that benefit cognitive functions are therefore also connected to the power of udana vata, especially those that have an upward moving pranic energy such as white sage.

Samana vata

Samana vata is the “equalizing” or “balancing air.” Located throughout the small intestine, it could be described as the nerve force of the intestines that governs digestion. It has an inward movement toward center of body, which assists the assimilation of nutrients.

Samana vata and essential oils

The internal use of pure essential oils is contraindicated because of their extremely irritating effects on gastric mucosa. However, the use of aromatic herbs is a primary treatment for this sub-dosha.

Disturbances of samana vata lead to vitiation and accumulation of vata dosha in the form of intestinal gas. Samana vata is treated most effectively with aromatic herbs and spices, whose active principles are essential oils. The numerous genera of the Labiatae family such as *Origanum*, *Ocimum*, *Mentha*, *Melissa*, *Thymus*, *Rosemarinus*, *Salvia* and *Nepeta* all help normalize the smooth flow of samana vata. Any type of aromatic tea that contains spices such as ginger, cardamom, cinnamon, coriander, black or long pepper, fennel and so on, as well as the aromatic teas that contain anti-spasmodic functions, such as chamomile and lavender, all work directly on samana vata. A classic example of an aromatic herb that pacifies samana vata by relaxing the nerves is melissa.

Samana vata is also affected by aromatherapy when essential oils are used in conjunction with abdominal massage and abdominal treatments such as ginger compresses.

Vyana vata

Vyana vata is translated as the “diffusing” or “pervasive air.” It is centered in the heart, and circulates outward throughout the body. It could be thought of as the vital force of circulation, which governs the blood vessels and gives strength to the musculoskeletal system. Through its action we can express ourselves through movement and activity.

Vyana vata and essential oils

Vyana vata is directly affected during various types of massage. Essential oils used in massage oils, especially those that enhance lymphatic drainage or produce mild rubefacient effects, enhance the benefits for this sub dosha. Camphor, birch, and menthol found in liniments are examples of aromatics that directly affect the superficial levels of vyana vata.

Ayurveda uses numerous complex herbal oils that help oleate the skin, muscles, and joints; this oleation has a supportive effect on vyana vata. These preparations are generally composed of numerous herbal ingredients, including aromatics, which have been cooked slowly for long periods of time in carrier oils such as sesame.

Apana vata

Apana vata is the “downward moving air.” It is centered in the colon and governs processes of elimination: urination, defecation, menstruation, sexual functions and childbirth. This sub-dosha is considered the support for the other vatas and exerts a controlling influence on their functions. Regulation and normalization of this vata is a primary goal of traditional therapeutic treatments.

Apana vata and essential oils

Essential oils do not have a direct influence over apana vata when used in typical aromatherapy treatments such as massage, atmospheric diffusing, or steam treatments. Medical aromatherapy uses rectal and vaginal applications of essential oils, which have a direct effect on this sub-dosha. Examples of this would be the use of dilute tea tree for vaginal douching for candida, or lavender oil diluted in a carrier oil as a rectal implant for prostatitis. Calmative, relaxant, and anxiolytic oils can have an indirect effect on apana vata when used for vatagenic conditions such as Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Aromatic herbs are traditionally mixed with laxatives to prevent “gripping.”

Essential Oils and The 5 Pittas

Sadhaka pitta

Sadhaka means the “accomplishing” or “realizing” pitta. Located in the heart and brain, it governs mental energy, digestion of mental impressions and power of discrimination. It could be described as the cellular enzymatic activity within the brain and heart, as pitta is closely connected to agni, the fires of metabolic transformation. At the psychological and emotional level it supports the intellect, intelligence, and ego in accomplishing their goals. This aspect of digestive fire allows the fulfillment of pleasure, wealth, prestige, and spiritual liberation.

Sadhak pitta and essential oils

Sadhaka pitta is directly influenced by oils that have stimulating and tonifying effects on cognitive functions, especially alertness, concentration, and memory. These include melissa, which has documented regenerative effects on acetylcholine receptor sites; gingergrass and other cymbopogon oils, which are nasal decongestants and mental stimulants; lemon-scented oils such as lemongrass (a cymbopogon); citruses in general, especially neroli; and the eucalypti and conifers, which stimulate alertness.

Floral oils and those that stimulate euphoric or aphrodisiac responses within the limbic system, such as jasmine, rose, neroli, ylang ylang and champa, could be considered oils that act upon this sub-dosha, as this level of pitta gives fulfillment of various forms of pleasure.

Alochaka pitta

Alochaka means “seeing.” It is the metabolic fire within the eyes and optic nerve that gives visual perception and allows the eyes to see. Spiritually, it is the clarity within the eyes that reflects spiritual qualities within the being, and the energy that motivates the mind toward clarity and understanding.

Alochaka pitta and essential oils

Essential oils cannot be used directly in or around the eyes. However, all oils that have nasal decongestant effects indirectly benefit this sub-dosha. Many hydrosols (aromatic distillate water) can be highly effective for reducing inflammation or infection (pitta) in the eyes when used as washes; one example is myrtle. Additionally, many aromatic herbs benefit the eyes through their mucolytic and anti-inflammatory effects on the sinuses.

Pachaka pitta

Pachaka means the “digesting fire.” Located in the small intestine, it governs the digestive processes and separates nutrient essence from waste. This sub-dosha of pitta assists in the building of tissues, purification of toxins within food, and regulation of body temperature. It is the basis and support of other pitta sub-doshas and the most important pitta for treatment.

Pachaka pitta and essential oils

Essential oils cannot be ingested directly. However, when deficient, this sub-dosha of pitta is treated with essential oil-containing spices and aromatic herbs. Ayurveda utilizes a large assortment of “pachak” or digestive herbal mixtures for treating low digestive fire, which typically include black pepper, long pepper, ginger, fennel, cardamom, coriander, and various salts. The use of essential oils for culinary purposes has a direct effect on this level of pitta.

Bhrajaka pitta

Bhrajaka means “luster.” Located in the skin, this sub-dosha of pitta governs complexion and skin coloration, the digestion of sunlight and the warmth of peripheral circulation. Spiritually, it is that which gives luminosity to the auric field of the body.

Bhrajaka pitta and essential oils

Essential oils play an important role in treating pathologies and maintaining the health of this sub-dosha. If used incorrectly, such as applying caustic or phototoxic essential oils directly to the skin, it is this sub-dosha that responds with inflammatory symptoms of dermatitis. If used correctly, essential oils can be very beneficial for reducing the pitta aggravation of dermal inflammations and infections.

Essential oils have been used for millennia for treating this sub-dosha, in the form of ointments, unguents, washes, sprays, and other cosmetic applications. Many oils are gentle yet potent anti-inflammatories, such as lavender, frankincense, rose, geranium, and chamomile, which are cosmetic ingredients with ancient histories. Many of these oils also have strong wound healing, scar tissue-resolving, and skin rejuvenating powers; the helichrysum oils are one the best known examples.

In addition to essential oils, hydrosols and fatty oils can also be included in treatments of bhrajaka pitta. Abhiyanga, self-oleation or oleation with massage, has been the primary treatment for maintaining the health, integrity, and immunological strength of this sub-dosha.

Ranjaka pitta

Ranjaka means “color.” Located in the liver, spleen, stomach and small intestine, this sub-dosha is responsible for giving color to the blood, feces and urine. It could be regarded as the cycle of bile, from the degradation of red blood cells in the spleen to the secretion of bile into the small intestine and into the feces.

Ranjaka pitta and essential oils

Essential oils do not have a direct effect on ranjaka pitta.

Essential Oils and The 5 Kaphas

Tarpaka kapha

Tarpaka means “contentment.” Located in the brain, heart and cerebro-spinal fluid, this sub-dosha of kapha provides nutrition, strength, and lubrication to the nerves. Emotionally, it provides emotional calmness and stability; it also plays an important role in supporting the functions of memory. Spiritually, it gives inner happiness and joy, mental contentment and bliss. It is regenerated through meditation.

Tarpaka kapha and essential oils

Aromatherapy has a direct effect on tarpaka kapha. As one of the sub-doshas of the brain, there is a direct link between aromatherapy, the limbic system and consciousness. The oils most directly beneficial for this sub-dosha include the floral relaxants and calmatives such as lavender, clary sage, chamomile, geranium, and rose; the sacred scents that evoke contemplative and devotional moods such as agarwood, sandalwood, rose, lotus, palo santo, and frankincense; and the sedative oils with strong effects on the subconscious and dream states, such as valerian and jatamansi.

As with treatment of prana vata, the profound relaxation induced by the warm oil treatment of shirodhara has a profound effect on this sub-dosha.

Bodhaka kapha

Bodhaka means “perceiving.” Located in the mouth, tongue and saliva, this sub-dosha of kapha governs the sense of taste and initiates the first stages of digestion.

Bodhaka kapha and essential oils

Aromatherapy is directly related to bodhaka kapha. Loss of taste is frequently secondary to the loss of smell. In some cases, depending on the cause, loss of smell can be restored using aromatherapy. Additionally, essential oil-containing spices and aromatic herbs act directly on this kapha when consumed with food or as teas.

Kledaka kapha

Kledaka means “moistening.” Located in the stomach, this sub-dosha of kapha is the alkaline secretions of the mucous membranes of the GI tract. It governs the liquefaction of food during first stages of digestion, controls the watery elements of the digestive process, protects against the acidic properties of pitta, and helps the movement of nutrients from the GI tract to the tissues.

Kledaka kapha and essential oils

Decreased digestive fire leads to increase of kapha, both locally and systemically; when there is an accumulation and excess of kledaka kapha in the GI tract, aromatic spices and herbs are a primary treatment. The essential oil-containing aromatic medicines used in

these cases have digestive properties including carminative, mucolytic, stomachic, anti-spasmodic, and cholegic. This list includes the entire range of culinary herbs and spices: cardamom, fennel; ginger, black pepper, long pepper, basil, bay leaves, coriander, cumin, dill, hyssop, marjoram, oregano, thyme, peppermint, rosemary, sage, and many others.

Sleshaka kapha

Sleshaka means “lubrication.” Located in the joints, this kapha produces the synovial fluids. It functions to hold joints together and to give ease of movement. It provides strength and stability in movement.

Sleshaka kapha and essential oils

This sub-dosha of kapha is directly benefited when essential oils are used in the treatment of musculoskeletal injuries and arthritis; a wide range of anti-inflammatory oils are beneficial for these conditions. Frankincense, helichrysum, jatamansi, and sweet birch are primary oils for reducing inflammation (pitta) that affect the joints, while fatty carrier oils such as sesame, coconut, almond and numerous others give hydration to sleshaka kapha.

Avalambaka kapha

Avalambaka means “supporting.” Located in the heart and lungs, this sub-dosha is the storehouse of kapha that controls the other kapha sub-doshas; it is the primary kapha. At the physical level it is the phlegm produced by the lungs; it also has an affinity with the blood plasma. Emotionally, this sub-dosha is responsible for the creation of emotional attachments.

Avalambaka kapha and essential oils

This sub-dosha is directly affected by respiratory essential oils that have expectorant, decongestant, and antitussive effects, including eucalypti, conifers, angelica, white sage, and frankincense. The use of these oils is especially beneficial when used in steam inhalations and compresses. The routine use of these oils in atmospheric diffusing is an excellent way of protecting the immunological integrity of this sub-dosha from mold and contagion of colds and flus.