

Aromatherapy from Ayurveda's perspective

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Introduction

In Sanskrit, "Ayus" means life, "Veda" means science (knowledge), thus "Ayurveda" translates as "Science of Life".

Ayurveda is an ancient medicine that originated in India, which has a history of 3500 to 5000 years. Among Chinese and Greek medicine, Ayurveda is the one of the oldest systems of medicine. Its philosophy suggests that perfect health can be achieved only by a very strong immune system. Good health in Ayurveda's perspective is the result of harmony between an individual's physical, emotional, and spiritual well being, as well as lifestyle, diet, and numerous other things. It perceives disease as a healing opportunity and a time for change. Ayurveda also focuses on the prevention of the disease, rather than waiting to treat disease at the disruptive stage.

Being an ancient and oriental medicine, Ayurveda does not approach health with invasive treatment or synthetic medications. Instead, it suggests a well-balanced life style with proper diet, herbs, exercise, activities, colors, music, meditation, and yoga. Among these lifestyle suggestions, many publications, if not all, describe the use of essential oils.

This paper will describe the basic philosophy of Ayurveda. My main focus is to summarize the use of aromatherapy from Ayurveda's perspective as well as provide a comparison to the holistic aromatherapy approach.

History

As noted earlier, the Ayurveda was originated in India approximately 5000 years ago. Their philosophy was built based upon a wide variety of herbs, and the knowledge was passed on. Many of the herbs were studied and recorded. However, during the British Colonial period, it was forbidden, and all the Ayurvedic health clinics were closed. As Western medicine became more common, the Ayurveda was considered as a poor people's medicine. However, since the independence of India, Ayurveda slowly reemerged, and currently 70 % of the populations are treated ayurvedically. After the long interference caused by the British Colonial, the consistencies of the knowledge of Ayurveda were scattered. In the *The knowledge of the Ayurveda*, the author Dr. Takahashi notes that in the early eighty's, a number of the doctors felt a need existed to re-establish the knowledge of Ayurveda. What came out of their efforts is known as modern Ayurveda. Their approach to Ayurvedic treatment is practiced widely in the United States, India, Europe, and Asia. Today, there are many Ayurvedic health centers in the United States.

Essential oils, which are the main product used in aromatherapy, are extracted from plant materials by applying steam to force out their essences into highly concentrated liquids. Humans have been using aromatic plants since the ancient times, however, the distillation of essential oils was not widely practiced until the 18th century. I am not very certain as to

when aromatherapy was integrated to Ayurvedic treatments. However, considering that they used a wide variety of herbs as remedies for 5000 years, it is reasonable to make an assumption that Ayurvedic physicians recognized the benefit of using such natural plant essences.

What are the Doshas?

Dosha means “impurity” in Sanskrit. Pratima Raichur in her book Absolute Beauty defines it as “metabolic principles governing mind and body; the intelligence of the body-mind.” There are three doshas; Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. Ayurveda believes all individuals have the elements of three doshas, often one of them being stronger than the others. This is called the primary dosha of that individual, which can be similarly recognized as their body type. It is often possible that one can have one primary dosha, with a second strong if not as dominant as the first. The second primary dosha is called “sub-dosha”. Rarely one has all equally portioned predominant dosha.

Doshas are comprised with the combinations of five elements; earth, water, fire, air, and ether. Ayurveda thinks that each of us has micro universe within ourselves, just as there is macro universe outside of us. These five elements are important in understanding the functions of the body.

Earth represents stability such as bones, cells and tissues. Water presents change, and we have liquids in our body such as blood and lymph. The water elements deliver nutrients, carrying away the waste, regulating temperature, and carrying hormonal information. Fire represents heat and energy, which is critical for digesting foods or building muscles. Air is the movement, mobile and dynamic functions of the body. Ether is the space in-between everything. It defines one thing from another.

Vata is the combination of air and ether, and its characteristics are light, active, quick, cold, and dry. Individuals who have primary Vata dosha are often of thin frame and tall or short. They are often positive, imaginative, active, and learn new things very quickly and make friends with people easily. When they have too much Vata (imbalance), they are likely to be distracted, forgetful and have anxiety and insomnia. Being air and ether, they can develop gas in the stomach, have constipation, cold and dry skin.

Pitta is the combination of fire and water, and its characteristics are heating, light, mobile, and oily. Pitta individuals are often of moderate frame with good proportion. They are passionate, confident, eloquent and like challenges and often possess good leadership skills. In Pitta imbalance, they often experience indigestion, acne, heartburn, and over perspiration. The emotional Pitta imbalances are anger, criticism, destructive and controlling.

Kapha is the combination of water and earth, and its characteristics are cold, oily, heavy, slow, and stable. Kapha individuals are often large framed, and easily gain weight. They are loyal, compassionate, calm and peaceful. Their sleep is long and sound and they are slow to learn new things, however, once learned, they never forget. When they have too

much Kapha, they tend to be sluggish, attached, uncaring, and are likely to experience respiratory imbalances, water retention, and weight gain.

Ayurvedic physicians use “pulse diagnosing” to determine what are an individual’s primary dosha and existing imbalances. Dr. Takahashi, the author of *The knowledge of Ayurveda* states that a highly experienced doctor can identify numerous health histories with no prior knowledge of the patient by checking their pulse.

Most Ayurveda books offer questionnaires that one can answer and find out what their primary dosha is as well as their body type. In 2000, I had a health consultation with a Maharishi Ayurvedic doctor. Prior to having the consultation, I had found that my primary dosha is Kapha from a couple of questionnaires. After checking my pulse for a few minutes, the doctor told me that I had Kapha as my primary dosha; however, I also had Pitta as the sub-dominant dosha. I was given numerous suggestions as to diet, yoga, and herb supplements. I was also given the synergy of essential oil (pre-made product) that had juniper, clove, patchouli, clary sage, sandalwood, etc.

Holistic approach

The holistic aromatherapy approaches an individual as a "whole person". This means that we need to look at all aspects of an individual’s life when we consider the particular imbalance that that person might have. For example, if the individual complains about having fibromyalgia, rather than focusing only on the disease, we consider the individual's overall life style and get the picture of how the disease is relating to the individual. This might mean that we need to consider his/her stress level, life style, general outlook on the life, spirituality, eating and exercising habit, relationship issues, and so on. Also we need to take in consideration of how the disease is affecting the individual’s psyche. In another words, in the holistic aromatherapy, we consider that body, mind, and spirit are all connected.

Dr. Light Miller the author of *Ayurveda & Aromatherapy* states that there are six stages of diseases in the philosophy of Ayurveda; 1) accumulation, 2) aggravation, 3) dissemination, 4) relocation, 5) manifestation and 6) disruption. She explains that an imbalance could exist in the stage of accumulation by inappropriate diet, lifestyle and negative emotions and feelings. The western medicine recognizes the disease only at the manifestation stage.

Ayurveda believes that to strengthen our five senses also promotes our health, and suggests incorporating methods to do so in our lives. For example, by eating proper foods, we please our sense of taste. Massages and yoga promotes our sense of touch. Inhaling the aroma of plants can enhance our sense of smell. Music also could help us by uplifting or calming our moods through our auditory sense. Particular colors impact our sense of vision and have particular effects such as red being stimulating or purple being calming. Yuri Takano, the author of *Incorporating Ayurveda to your diet* also explains that our sixth sense, which has positive effect to our body/mind health, can also be strengthened by meditation.

Ayurveda in summary is holistic approach, which can be integrated into all aspect of our lives.

Massage

In the traditional British aromatherapy, the work of Marguerite Maury for utilizing essential oils on dermal application through massage oil is practiced. In Ayurveda, the daily massage routine called “abhyanga” is encouraged. Abhyanga can be done as the form of self-massage or from a mother to an infant. Abhyanga was practiced in India for many years.

Massage is extremely common in India. In the article *Aromatic Indian head massage NAHA – Aromatherapy Journal issue 13.2*, Felicity Lawrence writes; “Many a person born in India is massaged regularly from birth to death. Babies are rubbed with oil daily for the first three years, as Indian mothers know that massage enhances blood circulation and joint mobility. It may also serve to facilitate the development of the baby’s lymphatic and immune systems. The majority of Indian populations live in rural villages, where massaging the body is an inherent part of the social culture. Traveling thorough India, it is common to see women sitting on the ground massaging their babies, which lie peacefully cradled on their mother’s outstretched legs”.

The traditional base oil that has been used in Abhyanga is sesame oil. Hari Sharma MD, and Christopher Clark MD, the authors of *Contemporary Ayurveda – Medicine and Research in Maharishi Ayurveda* describes sesame oil as “Linoleic acid, which makes up 40% of the oil, is known to inhibit the growth of certain bacteria, especially pathogenic bacteria. Linoleic acid also is a powerful anti-inflammatory agent; some researchers have compared its potency to indomethacin”. They do not explain the use of the essential oils in the base oil, however, they briefly explain that “ Maharishi Ayurveda has modalities that affect every one of the senses, including smell, and uses a wide range of aromas – usually floral or herbal essences – precisely calibrated to pacify specific subdoshas or doshas.”

Dr. Light Miller explains the details of the wide variety of base oils. She indicates that each oil has a specific action to either increase or decrease the specific doshas. For example, for the Vata dominant individuals, sesame oil and flax oil are recommended. For the Pitta predominant individuals, olive oil and sunflower oil are recommended. For the Kapa predominant individuals, she recommends canola oil, safflower oil, and sweet almond oil.

Pratima Raichur says that the ghee, also known as clarified butter, is the most penetrating base material, and it is commonly used in India. It is widely used in Ayurveda as an ingredient in skin care preparation as well as in cooking.

Rejuvenation Program

Pancha karma is a rejuvenation program offered at Ayurvedic clinics. Usually the program consists of several days of intense detoxification sessions such as massage, herbal saunas, special foods and dietary patterns, mild fasting and colon therapy, and

aromatherapy. The patient starts the program with a consultation by an Ayurvedic doctor. The doctor performs a pulse diagnosis and determines the customized program for the patient. *Pancha Karma (information brochure) Ayurvedic and Naturopathic Medical Clinic, Bellevue, WA* reports of the effect of the pancha karma are significant, ranging from improving various chronic illnesses, obesity, depression, digestive problems, etc.

Dr. Takahashi describes his experiences with pancha karma at the Maharishi Ayurveda center in Massachusetts. He states that during his several days of the treatment program, he spent daytime receiving massages, saunas and other treatment as well as aromatherapy inhalation in his private room on evenings.

Selecting essential oils

In the holistic aromatherapy, an aromatherapist carefully makes the selection of essential oils for customized treatment typically by in-depth consultation through understanding individual's existing health problems, life styles, and emotional state. In Ayurvedic perspective, its philosophy perfectly fits into this "holistic" approach yet seems to add another layer to the selection of essential oils. For them the interest is also which dosha is out of the balance. To demonstrate this, the common cold can be treated with different essential oils depending on the individual's primary dosha. Dr. Light Miller suggests the following essential oils for each doshas.

Vata: ginger, camphor, cinnamon, anise, lemon, rosewood, angelica, basil eucalyptus, cajeput

Pitta: chamomile, coriander, lime, peppermint, sandalwood, yarrow

Kapa: basil, clove, eucalyptus, niaouli, hyssop, rosemary, sage, savory

To the holistic aromatherapy view, this list is not such a puzzle. For example, a Vata predominant person might develop stomach upset and or he/she might need grounding oils based on the wind/ether elements. The groups of the essential oils that are chosen are carminative, grounding and warming. Having the heating quality, a Pitta predominant person might have fever during a common cold episode. Many essential oils that are chosen in this list are febrifuge and anti-inflammatory. A Kapha predominant person has tendencies to have respiratory imbalances in the common cold. The essential oils that are chosen are naturally decongestant and expectorant.

Essential oils are chemically very complex substance. Today one of the leading aromatherapists with in depth chemistry background is Dr. Kurt Schnaubelt. In his book “*Advanced Aromatherapy*”, he summarizes the main chemical functional group of the essential oils as illustrated in Figure 1.

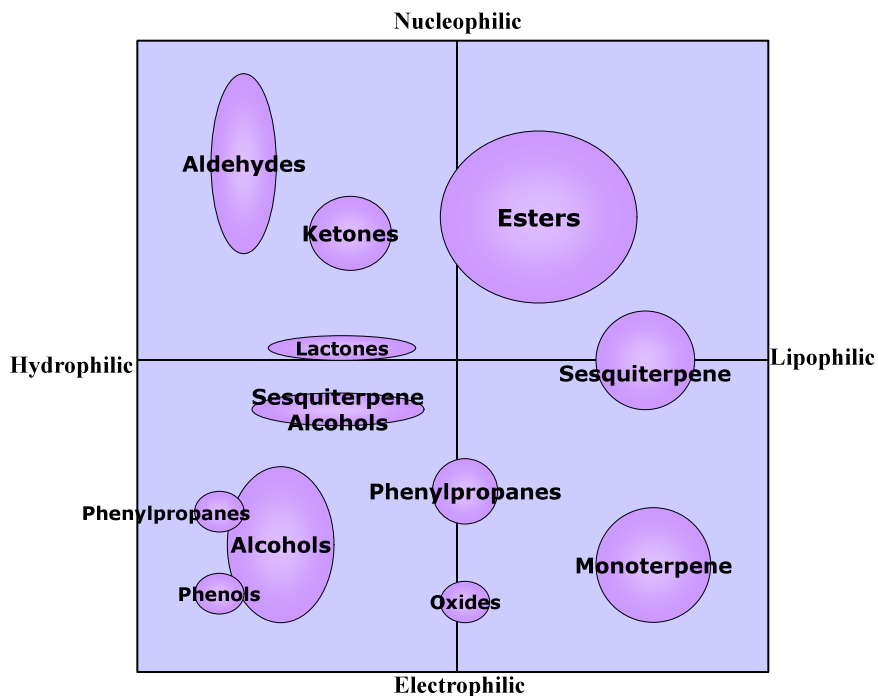


Figure 1. The Chemical Functional Groups in essential oils

As shown in the figure 1, essential oils have chemical components such as monoterpne, sesquiterpene, esters, aldehydes, alcohols, etc. The property of particular chemical components determines the action of the essential oil. For example, clary sage is high in esters. Esters have the property of relaxing, anti-spasmodic, equilibrating, and anti-fungal.

Dr. Schnaubelt’s chart (Figure 1) has two axes pointing up and down, and right to left. The vertical axis indicates necleophilic and electrophilic, and the horizontal axis indicates hydrophilic and lipophillic.

Dr. Light Miller uses a similar chart, however, the vertical axis is labeled as cold and hot, and the horizontal axis is labeled as wet and dry (shown in Figure 2). Ayurveda recognizes that some essential oils are cooling and some are heating. Chemically, the essential oils that are placed towards the top of the chart (cooling) have extra electrons, taking the heat away. Conversely, the essential oils that are at the bottom on this axis (heating) are electro-positive. They try to acquire missing electrons in their outer rings, thus creating the heating energy. Moisturizing and Drying can be observed in the response of the essential oil by placing a drop on the water. No essential oil is perfectly water-soluble, however, more hydrophilic oils such as rose when placed in the water will

disperse into the water. Lipophilic oils such as pine, on the other hand, will float on the top of the water, forming a ring.

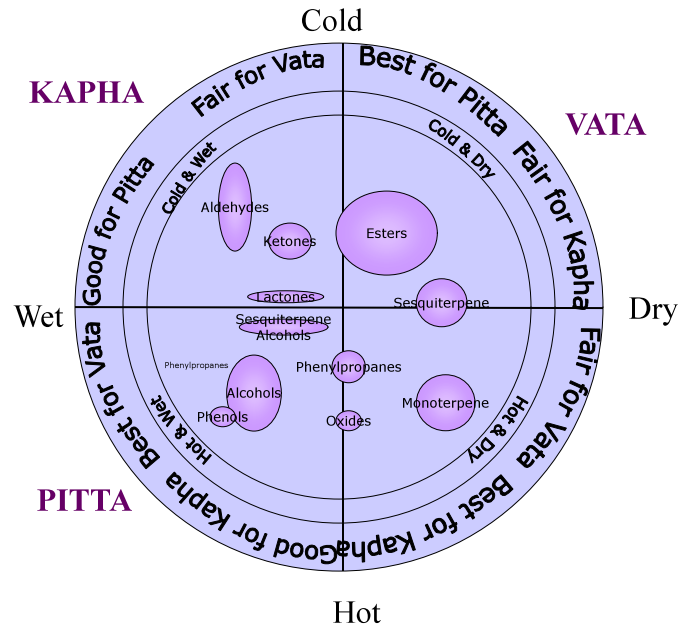


Figure 2 The Chemical Functional Groups and doshas

In Ayurveda, it is believed that same dosha activity increase that very same dosha. Conversely, the very opposite energy decreases that particular dosha. When the particular dosha is in imbalance, it is at advantage to add something “opposite”. For example, if a person has primary Pitta dosha, and is out of the balance of that dosha, he/she might be very irritated, angry, feeling hot, and having heartburn. In this situation, eating very spicy food could aggravate the condition. Instead, cool foods and drinks could restore the balance.

In the same fashion, the essential oils can be selected based on the dosha balance. Being wind and ether, Vata is cold and dry. To reduce too much Vata, it is best to use the oil that is heating and moisturizing. This can be observed in Figure 3.

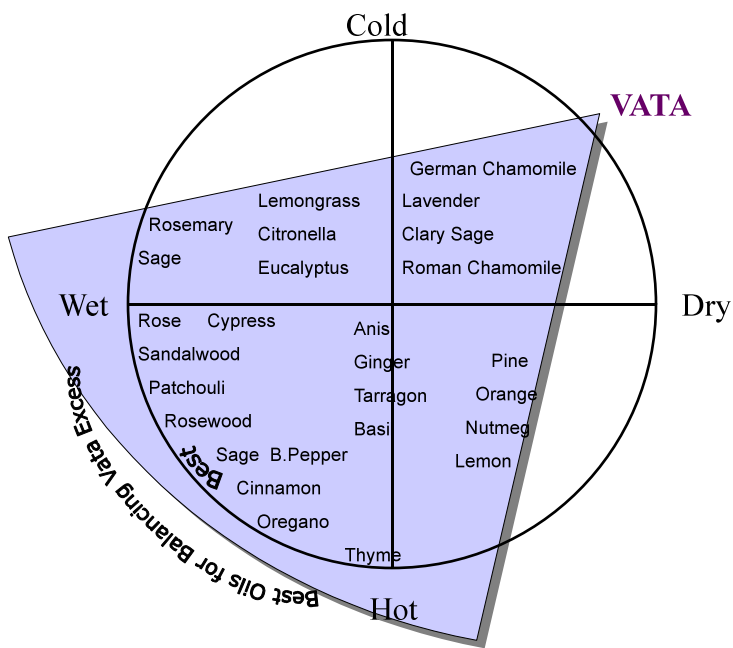


Figure 3 Essential Oils for Vata Imbalance

Pitta is the combination of fire and water; therefore, it is hot and wet. To reduce too much Pitta, it is best to use the essential oils that are cooling and drying. (Figure 4)

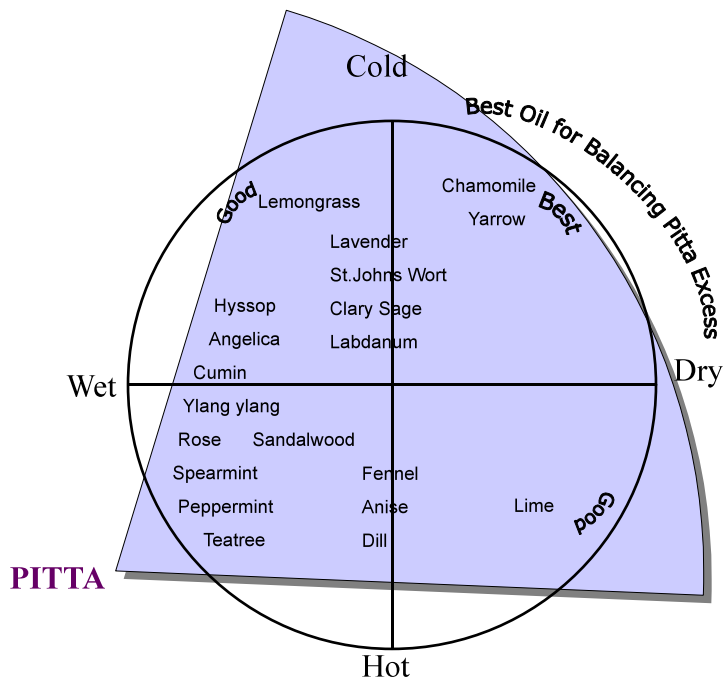


Figure 4 Essential Oils for Pitta Imbalance

Kapha is the combination of water and earth; therefore it is cold and wet. To reduce too much Kapha, it is best to use the essential oils that are heating and drying. (Figure 5)

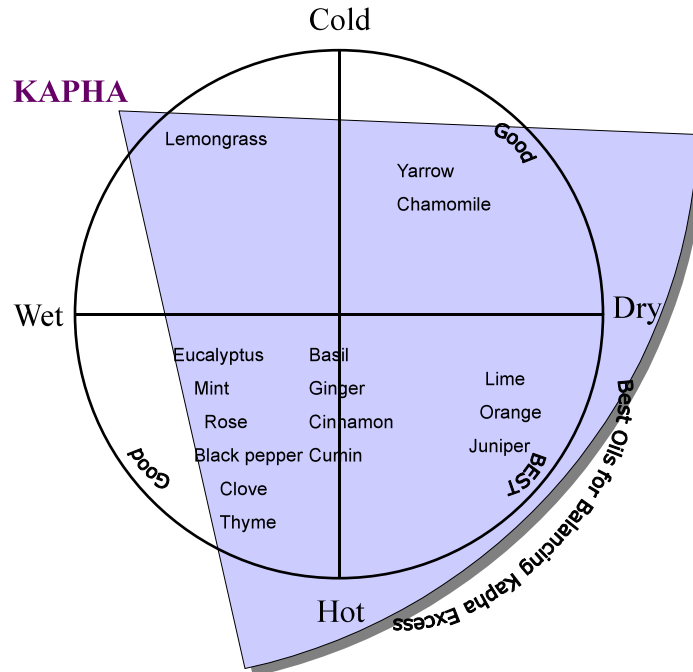


Figure 5 Essential Oils for Kapha Imbalance

This method of addition/reduction of dosha through essential oil can be a tool to use for blending the essential oils. However, as everything is in moderate balance, it does not mean that certain essential oils cannot be used for a particular dosha. For example, lavender, which is cooling/moisturizing, can be used with other heating oils as a supporting oil if it serves the purpose, or to balance the overall synergy.

Chakra oils

Light Miller also explains the use of essential oils for the chakras. The chakras are transfer points for our thoughts and feelings and the physical functioning of specific endocrine glands. According to her, “the essential oils increase the finest and farthest vibrations and assist all of the subtle bodies. Essential oils can stigmata and assist in the process of awakening, healing, opening the chakras, and strengthening the aura.” There are various ways to stimulate chakras such as massage, acupuncture, chiropractic, breath work, and visualization. She says that anointing essential oils to chakras can assist in opening and stimulating them. The following chart summarizes her suggestion of the essential oils.

| | Western name | Sanskrit Name | Location | Essential oils |
|-----------------|--------------|---------------|----------------------------|---|
| 7 th | Crown | Sahasrara | Top of cranium | Frankincense, myrrh, |
| 6 th | Third Eye | Ajna | Above and between eyebrows | Basil, lavender, jasmine, eucalyptus, rosemary, lemon |
| 5 th | Throat | Vishuddha | Throat | Cajeput, sandalwood, bergamot, teat tree, German chamomile |
| 4 th | Heart | Anahata | Chest over heart | Rose, cinnamon, orange, neroli, bergamot, yarrow, lavender |
| 3 rd | Solar Plexus | Manipura | Between navel and ribcage | Sandalwood, anise, fennel, lavender |
| 2 nd | Sexual | Svadhishana | Pubic area | Cedarwood, clary sage, cypress, lemon verbena, myrtle, rosewood, ylang ylang, patchouli |
| 1 st | Base Root | Muladadhara | Between genitals and anus | Vetiver, angelica, cypress, spikenard, ginger, |

Conclusion

In Ayurveda, the essential oils are used widely through skin care, massage, pancha karma (rejuvenation program), chakra oils, and various other remedies that affect mind/body health. Being a preventative and holistic medicine, it welcomes the aspect of essential oils as naturally extracted plant essences. Ayurveda and the holistic aromatherapy hold many approaches in common. One distinct difference is that in Ayurveda, the consideration of dosha (a combination of five elements) is carefully regarded. However, some leading aromatherapists are well informed with such oriental medicine principles. Gabriel Mojay extensively describes the idea of five elements in his *Aromatherapy for Healing the Spirit*. Dr. Kurt Schnaubelt also explains the idea of Yin/Yang in his *Advanced Aromatherapy*. Many Ayurveda books share the knowledge of early establishment such as works from Rene Maurice Gattefosse or Marguerite Maury. Ayurveda successfully incorporates the use of essential oils into their traditional ancient healing modality.

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