

Meditations on Scent

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The following notes were prepared to accompany an experiential presentation for the seminar on smell of the Sawyer Seminar series on “Embodied Values: Bringing the Senses Back to the Environment” at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities (IASH), The University of Edinburgh, January 2011. The series was coordinated by Rachel Harkness.

Very often scent is used to enhance experiences and practices such as meditation, but scent itself is rarely the focus of such activities. The aim of the session was to give participants the opportunity to meditate on a series of essential oil fragrances, explore their effects on the psyche, and to hear about their historical and cultural uses and their role in contemporary aromatherapy practice.

Introduction

The sense of smell is a primal sense which allows communication through odours by way of recognition of cues, odours and memory. It is a social reality that prompts a variety of associations and meaning in different cultures (Classen *et al.* 1994). It is probably the least consciously used of all the senses and yet at the same time probably the most widely exploited. Smell has been successfully transformed into a powerful and commercially viable product and as such has altered and lessened the primal nature of its function.

Ackerman (1990) writes that

“Smells spur memories, but they also rouse our dozy senses, pamper and indulge us, help define our self image, stir the cauldron of our seductiveness, warn us of danger, lead us into temptation, fan our religious fervour, accompany us to heaven, wed us to fashion, steep us in luxury. Yet, over time, smell has become the least necessary of our senses, “the fallen angel” as Helen Keller dramatically calls it.”

Although today the sense of smell is less heightened and less integral as a primal sense, historically that was not the case. The use of aromatic substances to elicit particular responses via the sense of smell was integral to many cultures and life practices. These uses include sacred and ritualistic practices such as anointing with fragrant oils and offering rites to gods; embalming and medicinal practices; as cosmetics, fumigants and mood-altering substances; as spiritual and philosophical healing systems; and for ritual stimulation of dreams and visions (Lawless 1992, Classen *et al.* 1994, Miller & Miller 1995, Wildwood 1998, Holmes 1998/1999, Worwood, 1999).

Aromatic substances were and still are used as an aid to meditation, altering the mood state and often, even though part of a sacred or ritualistic setting, were simply appreciated for the fragrance imparted during offerings or worship.

Smell is rarely the focus of meditation; oils, scented candles and incense are frequently used to create a particular environment or space to encourage a meditative state to enable the person to bring something else into focus e.g. breathing/ spiritual icon. However, today we are going to alter the approach and give some time and space to exploring the use of essential oils as not merely the background but the central focus of the meditation. In this way your attention will be entirely on the scent of the essential oils, giving you the freedom to explore the responses invoked within you and your immediate space.

A meditation on scent

Sit in a comfortable position. Hold the scent to your nose, and inhale deeply three times. Keeping your eyes open, imagine your consciousness dissolving outward to the scent, as if

you were touching it, merging with it, flowing into it. When you feel you have reached the point of saturation, close your eyes, and detach yourself from all senses but smell.

Descend deeply inside, bearing the essence of the scent you have chosen, and touch it with your vision of the scent. Build an inner picture of the essence – the essence of the essence. Imagine it as a phantasm, an animal, a memory, anything that seems to you to be conjured by the deep impression of the scent. Turn outward again, and consciously smell the scent again. Repeat the outer phase and inner phase until you feel that the experience has reached a natural conclusion.

This exercise will help you to carry in your consciousness a living connection with a particular essence, and through it, with the spiritual dimension of the scent in general.

You will find that each scent you meditate on creates a different internal image and meditative experience.

Meditation adapted from

Aftel, M. (2001) Essence and Alchemy: a book of perfume London: Bloomsbury

Phantasm

1. a phantom
2. an illusory perception of an object, person, etc.
3. (Philosophy) (in the philosophy of Plato) objective reality as distorted by perception
[from Old French *fantasme*, from Latin *phantasma*, from Greek; related to Greek *phantazein* to cause to be seen, from *phainein* to show]

The essential oils

Neroli

Historical/cultural uses

Neroli essential oil is obtained from the bitter orange blossom, *Citrus aurantium* var. *amara* – first becoming popular as a fragrance in the 16th century. The scent was named after a town

called Neroli, near Rome, whose princess used the scent and thus made it popular. Over the years, its use became widespread in Europe, from princesses to prostitutes (Lawless 1994). It is one of the most expensive natural materials in perfumery, Aftel (2001) describes its fragrance as ‘cool, elegant and intense.... with suave strength and understated sexuality’. Many of the floral oils, including neroli, do contain trace amounts of indol, a compound found in animal faeces. This is thought to have an erotic attraction for the animals involved in pollination (Calkin & Jellinek 1994), and perhaps why many of the scents categorised as aphrodisiacs do contain animal pheromones such as indol.

Mood characteristics

Animated, cheerful, infectious enthusiasm, joie de vivre, clear consciousness and self identity, creative spark, warmth via effective relationships, ability to give and receive, joy, laughing (adapted from Hicks, Hicks & Mole 2004).

Aromatherapy

Essential oils from flowers such as neroli often have a sweet quality, and intense, sometimes sensual odours associated with all aspects of creativity, including having fun, play, stimulating the imagination. These gentle euphorics are useful at times of emotional shock, and can help dispel anxieties related to poor self image/esteem, shyness and lack of confidence (Rhind 2009).

Benzoin

Historical/cultural uses

Benzoin is a resin that exudes from the wounded bark of small shrubby trees native to Sumatra – and it has a very long tradition of use as a fragrance. It has a soft, sweet, vanilla like scent; it is a fixative and a base note in perfumery. Benzoin was a valuable commodity in ancient Greece and Rome, and was introduced to Europe in the 17th century. Its popularity endured, with the result that Siam also became a major producer. Although it had medicinal uses, in Hindu and Buddhist practices benzoin was one of the incenses used to drive away evil. It is interesting to note that one of the ancient practices was to burn the resin at the feet of the dead, so that their souls were lifted to heaven with the smoke (Lawless 1994).

Mood characteristics

Feeling supported, nourished, centred, stable, sense of belonging, assimilation, letting go (adapted from Hicks, Hicks & Mole 2004)

Aromatherapy

Oils from resins such as benzoin can be used to help impart a sense of inner peace and security, stability and equilibrium. The sweet nature of benzoin is also experienced as nurturing and comforting, grounding and calming (Rhind 2009).

Cardamom

Historical/cultural uses

Cardamom is derived from the fruits/seeds of *Elettaria cardamomum* – a member of the same botanical family as ginger. Cardamom has been used for thousands of years, it is very important in Arabic cultures (Classen *et al.* 1994) and Eastern traditional medicine (Lawless 1994). Like neroli, it is often considered to be an aphrodisiac – but not to the same extent, and usually in combination with other aromatics. Lawless (1994) comments that cardamom, ‘the fire of Venus’, was used as a mediaeval love potion, and that according to Vedic texts it had a reputation as a powerful aphrodisiac. Cardamom features in incenses too, for example in Tibetan practice it is used medicinally for anxiety, and in Hindu ceremonies it forms part of a powdered incense formula called ‘Abir’. It has been distilled to yield the essential oil since the 16th century, and is used in perfumery to give spicy, warm notes in floral fragrances (Aftel 2001).

Mood characteristics

Feeling alert, mental clarity, animated, balanced, co-ordinated, clear sensations, connected with the heavens, inspired, high self esteem, able to breathe and eliminate, give and receive, able to feel loss then move on, feeling complete (adapted from Hicks, Hicks & Mole 2004).

Aromatherapy

Cardamom essential oil has a pungent, warm spicy odour that also has a penetrating camphoraceous/eucalyptus note. This is in part due to the presence of a constituent (the oxide 1,8-cineole) that has been shown to increase blood flow to the brain (Buchbauer 1993, 1996). The fragrance of cardamom is useful for promoting a feeling of calm vitality, self worth and mental clarity (Rhind 2009). Its main psychotherapeutic use in aromatherapy is for mental fatigue.

Virginian cedarwood

Historical/cultural uses

Although it is commonly called cedar, Virginian cedarwood essential oil is in fact derived from a species of juniper – *Juniperus virginiana*. This tree and its wood, and the incense derived from its wood holds an important place in Northwest/Pacific Indian tradition. The Cherokee tell that cedar wood holds powerful protective spirits. Pieces of cedar wood are placed in medicine bags, and also above the doors of homes to ward off evil spirits. Cedar wood was

also used to make totem poles and ceremonial drums. In ceremony and prayer, cedar is burned – and in common with other practices involving incense/smoke this is to carry the prayers to the Creator. In traditional and contemporary sweat lodges, cedar wood is used along with sage and other herbs such as sweetgrass, having a purifying function, and similarly cedar branches are used in house blessing ceremonies. It is interesting that the Pacific Northwest tribes say that not only does cedar drive away evil and negative energies but also brings in good energies.

Virginian cedarwood oil is distilled from the waste, powdered wood from sawmills, as the wood itself is an important commodity. The main use is in the manufacture of pencils, but it is used in furniture manufacture, including the traditional ‘cedar chest’.

Mood characteristics

A good capacity for risk assessment, good judgement of character, self possessed, self reliant, self confidence, steady drive, will (adapted from Hicks, Hicks & Mole 2004).

Aromatherapy

Oils from woods such as Virginian cedar can help the individual find a sense of resilience and inner strength. Woody scents can work to support the will, and are useful if you feel the need for an ‘inner anchor’ or need strength in times of crisis (Rhind 2009). However, it is important to learn from difficulties and gain wisdom – to allow for transformation (Mojay 1996). The scent of Virginian cedarwood can also be used in contemporary aromatherapy practice to help eliminate negative tendencies such as recklessness, destructive or addictive behaviour, and replace this with independence of mind and spirit.

Bitter orange

Historical/cultural uses

The bitter orange tree, *Citrus aurantium* var. *amara*, has been cultivated for its fragrance products for many years – its blossoms yield neroli, the leaves and twigs yield petitgrain, an important constituent of colognes, and the small fruits yield bitter orange oil from their peel.

The fruits have a long history of culinary and medicinal uses. The liqueur, *Curacao*, is flavoured with the unripe fruits. The tree is native to Asia; therefore its flowers and fruits form part of Oriental medicine – mainly as remedies for the myriad of disorders of the digestive system, as a cardiac tonic and for anxiety.

So, unlike the other aromatics in this cycle of scent, we turn to perfumery for its tradition of use on the psyche. Citrus oils are some of the most volatile of raw materials of perfumery – they form the top notes – the ones that reach the nose first. Bitter orange oil has indeed a citrus odour, but in contrast with its close relation sweet orange, it is subtle, fresh with a

fairly tenacious floral undertone (Aftel 2001). There has been some research into the impact of citrus scents on mood, and it could be reasonably assumed that some of the mood benefits would apply to bitter orange. Horangratanaworakit & Buchbauer (2007) demonstrated that transdermal absorption of sweet orange oil, a closely related citrus peel oil, decreased autonomic arousal while promoting feelings of cheerfulness and vigour, leading them to support the use of sweet orange oil for the relief of depression and stress.

Mood characteristics

A strong sense and vision of your path in life, patient, understanding that everything unfolds at the right pace, easy going, ability to think ahead and plan, but also be flexible, general contentment with the status quo, expansive, innovative energy (adapted from Hicks, Hicks & Mole 2004).

Aromatherapy

Oils from citrus fruits such as bitter orange have a distinct uplifting effect, and are also indicated for moving forward/moving on from redundant behaviour, and making a fresh start (Rhind 2009). Bitter orange oil also has a 'green' note and thus can also be used to counteract feelings of anger and frustration by promoting regulating, cooling, relaxing, clarifying sensations (Holmes 1997, Rhind 2009).

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