

Shedding Light on the Practice of Moxibustion

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Both science and folklore illustrate that the arts of acupuncture and moxibustion emerge from a prehistoric, legendary China, and have been widely used as a medical treatment for more than 5,000 years. Warming the body with burning moxa powder, or moxibustion, is world renown for its innumerable therapeutic benefits; it is referred to as *Yerba Buena*, *Yerba Sana* throughout Latin America (good herb, herb of health). Throughout 30 years of running a successful medical practice, and as a testament to the near-miraculous power of this plant, we are grateful for the opportunity to present the following information for our dear friend, Mr. William S. Wilson.

HISTORY

“The present generation should hold in awe acupuncture and treatment with moxa, which cure the diseases of the body.”

- *Huang Ti Nei Ching, Yellow Emperor's Classic of Internal Medicine*, Scroll 14

Ai ye or *Artemisia vulgaris* is a hardy, perennial plant that grows in such places as ditches and along roadsides throughout Asia, Europe, and North and South America. The Japanese refer to it as *mogusa* or moxa, probably from the common name of mugwort, originally from the old Germanic *muggiwurti* or "fly plant" as reported in the 1st-century C.E. by Greek physician, botanist, and pharmacologist Pedanius Dioscorides in his *Materia Medica* for its particular use as an insect repellent. During the Middle Ages, mugwort was believed to hold magical properties and to protect travelers from fatigue, sunstroke, and wild beasts; if kept in the shoes, mugwort would prevent weariness on long journeys. Legend has it that John the Baptist wore a mugwort girdle to sustain him in the wilderness (Lust 604).

Artemisia vulgaris is a species of chrysanthemum. From the extensive research of Joseph Needham, Ph.D. we know that the *Artemisia* cultivated in Qizhou is ideal for moxa as both the climate and soil are good for its growth, and reportedly best when collected during the fifth day of the fifth month in the Chinese calendar. The leaves of the Qizhou *Artemisia* are thought of as thick and producing more wool than other varieties. After selection, the leaves are then ground into a fine powdery material. Since the leaves contain yellowish-green oil, it is necessary to expose the powder to strong sunlight for a minimum of several days so that the oil evaporates; if this is not done, the moxa will be consumed too quickly during the medical treatment, and will cause more pain to the patient. The prepared moxa is kept in air-tight containers for as long as possible before use (171).

PHARMACOLOGY

“Deficiency of both *yin* and *yang* should be treated by moxibustion.”

- *Ling Shu, the Spiritual Pivot*, Chapter 73

Moxa has been recently analyzed in an effort to more fully comprehend its pharmacological actions on human physiology. In her definitive pharmacopeia, Dr. Him-che Yueng attributes *Artemisia vulgaris* with the following properties (pp 33-4):

1. *Antibacterial* – Moxa inhibits the growth of *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Bacillus typhi* or *Salmonella*, *B. dysenteriae*, *Beta-hemolytic Strep.*, *E. coli*, *B. subtilis*, and *Pseudomonas*

aeruginosa or bacterial pneumonia;

2. *Antifungal and antimycobacterial* – Moxa inhibits the growth of yeast and many other microorganisms known to cause serious diseases in mammals, including tuberculosis and leprosy;

3. *Expectorant and antiasthmatic* – Moxa inhibits asthmatic spasms from histamine or acetylcholine, and its oral use inhibits cough induced through contact with the widely produced industrial chemical, acrolein, a severe pulmonary irritant and suspected human carcinogen. It also dilates the bronchi, and is used for asthma with sputum and chronic bronchitis with cough;

4. *Central nervous system stimulant* – Moxa has the effect of temporarily warding off drowsiness and restoring alertness;

5. *Decreases capillary permeability* – Moxa can help resolve infections, and serves also in strengthening the network of capillaries supplying the organs;

6. *Increase blood coagulation* -- Coagulation is an important part of hemostasis (the cessation of blood loss from a damaged vessel) whereby a damaged blood vessel wall is covered by a platelet- and fibrin-containing clot to stop bleeding and begin repair of the damaged vessel;

7. *Antipyretic* – Moxa lowers fevers;

8. *Uterine stimulant* – Moxa may produce tonic contractions, facilitating natural labor induction;

9. It contains pellandrene, cadinene, thujyl alcohol, 1,8-cineol, and vitamins A, B1, B2, C, and D.

Artemisia vulgaris is known to promote smooth digestive function, benefit bile production, and decoctions of this plant are sometimes used to regulate menstruation (Lust 284). Furthermore, as referenced by Dr. Cui-lan Yan, using more classical terminology from the *Ben Cao Cong Xin or the Newly Revised Materia Medica* by Wu Yi-luo of the classical Qin dynasty (221 – 206 B.C.E.):

Mugwort is bitter and acrid in flavor and able to generate heat. It is pure *yang* in nature. Therefore, it is able to recover expired *yang*. It reaches all twelve channels, penetrates the three *yin* channels, rectifies *ch'i* and blood, expels cold and dampness, warms the uterus... When burnt, it penetrates the various channels to eliminate hundreds of diseases (26).

THE ART OF MOXIBUSTION

“Slowness with tranquility and quiet, and the skill of the hands and accurate judgment of the heart and mind are responsible for the actions of acupuncture and moxibustion, the principles of blood and *ch'i* and the harmonization of all that is in counter flow or smooth flowing, as well as the examination of *yin* and *yang*, together with all methods.”

- *Ling Shu, the Spiritual Pivot*, Chapter 73

The moxa may be fashioned into several types, as described by contemporary authorities on the subject of moxibustion such as Dr. Needham, Dr. Yan, and the widely used textbook on this subject, *Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion*. These types allow for a variety of therapeutic applications.

Moxa cones vary in size from rice grain to plum, and it is recommended that high-quality moxa wool be seasoned for at least nine years before shaping the cones. As previously noted, extensive storing and drying results in the evaporation of oils in the moxa, and therefore it burns moderately and will not damage the skin. Additionally, there are three types of methods for administering therapy with moxa cones:

First, scarring moxibustion involves burning the required number of cones, one by one, directly on the skin and then leaving the burns untreated. A couple of days later, the

blister that has formed will burst and then heal, leaving a scar. The blister and its sore are referred to as the moxibustion flower. Especially in classical practice and even by some modern practitioners, the production of such as moxa flower has been considered crucial for successful treatment. And according to Dr. Yan, clinical experience confirms that intentionally produced moxa sores do promote a curative effect (27).

Second, non-scarring moxibustion involves replacing a burning cone with a new one as soon as it causes an irritating heat. This method does not produce blisters but barely reddens the skin. It is often employed in such cases as ringworm, eczema, and chronic internal diseases.

Third, indirect moxibustion is the most common method in use today. It involves burning the moxa cone over a layer or thin slice of garlic, salt, medicated monkshood cake, ginger, or scallion with a small hole pierced in each in order to allow for the direct passage of heat.

Moxa rolls are preferred by most modern practitioners of Chinese medicine who use a cigar-shaped moxa roll or stick. These methods are painless, and therefore all patients are willing to accept it. There are two primary means of applying therapy with moxa rolls:

Warming moxibustion involves applying an ignited moxa roll over the selected point in order to bring a mild warmth to the local area for five to ten minutes, or until the area is red.

Sparrow-pecking moxibustion involves rapidly moving the ignited moxa roll to and from the selected point, paying attention not to burn the skin. In addition, the moxa may be evenly moved from left to right or in a circular motion.

Needle moxa is a method of combining acupuncture and moxibustion, and it is used for conditions in which both the retaining of the needle and moxibustion are needed. It is performed by carefully wrapping the needle handle with a small quantity of moxa wool and igniting it to cause an additional mild heat sensation around the point, after the *ch'i* sensation by acupuncture has been detected. This method functions to warm the meridians and promote smooth flow of both *ch'i* and blood. It is often used to treat painful joints especially when caused by cold and damp or numbness with cold and paralysis.

Heavenly moxibustion is also known as paste moxibustion, and it refers to the application of a paste made from an herbal mixture often including *Artemisia vulgaris*. The ingredients are irritating and often provoke pain or even blistering on contact with the skin. This provocation serves to reduce the inflammatory response in the local area where the paste is applied (Yan 28).

CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

“If stagnation of blood in the meridians cannot be treated with moxibustion, it cannot be treated by acupuncture.”

- *Ling Shu, the Spiritual Pivot*, Chapter 75

As reported by Dr. Needham, the unanimous testimony of moxibustionists is that although pain is produced when the moxa burns down to the skin, it is not really unpleasant pain. It leaves the patient with a deep glowing sensation, a feeling of wellbeing, analogous to the subjective responses characteristic of acupuncture. Notably, this sensation cannot be reproduced with burning tobacco, wood, cotton, or similar substances, or by localized application of steam heat or electrical devices. Sakamoto Mitsugi and other Japanese experts are inclined to think that some active principle is absorbed from the burning moxa, just as we know that doses of nicotine are absorbed

from lit cigarettes or cigars even though most of the alkaloid must be lost in the ash of the glowing tip. There are also indications that moxibustion promotes phagocytosis (cellular activity of eliminating microorganisms, insoluble particles, damaged cells, or cellular debris) and that it raises blood cortisone levels affecting the inflammatory response. At any rate, it is widely accepted that no other substance will give the pleasant feeling of relief which is given by moxa (171).

The mild heat that is produced through moxibustion penetrates deeply into the muscles relieving pain and tension; and, perhaps through its effect on the blood circulation, is an effective means of dispersing and eliminating toxins from the system (Yan 17).

For example, one commonly treated point is *Kao-huang* (Ub43), actually a famous pair of acupoints used in moxibustion, located about halfway down the scapula. There is a 13th-century C.E. explanation that all circulation passes through these points, and that the current can be either blocked or overflowing, but the moxa restores the flow to normality (Needham 183). Similarly, moxibustion is applied to warm all of the meridians and expel cold from the system. Cold is one of the factors responsible for impeding the smooth circulation of *ch'i* and blood. Additionally, moxibustion is used to induce *ch'i* and blood to flow either upward or downward in the system, usually through applying moxa to either *baihui*, the crown of the head, or *yongquan*, the soles of the feet, respectively.

Moxibustion is known to strengthen *yang* from collapse. *Yang ch'i* is the foundation of the human body, and it is the active quality rather than the nourishing quality. If it exists with sufficient strength, then a person lives a long life. However, if it is lost, death occurs. This *yang* disorder is due to excess of *yin*, leading to cold, deficiency and exhaustion of the primary *ch'i*, characterized by a fatal pulse. If at this crucial moment moxibustion is applied, it can reinforce the *yang ch'i* and prevent collapse (Cheng 340).

Largely through folklore concerning moxibustion, we understand that it has been used to prevent disease and remain healthy by employing moxa as a prophylactic, primarily through the application of scarring moxibustion to create a sore or multiple sores on the body. From as early as 1220 C.E., Wang Chih-Chung relates an ancient proverb, "If you wish to be safe, never allow the *Zusanli* (St36) acupoints to become dry." Moxa was one of the most important components of first-aid kits whenever people went on journeys (Needham 181).

Another important folkloric use of moxa was in cases of snake-bite. From the *Thai-Phing Kuang Chi*, a vast collection assembled in 978 C.E., Chao Yen-Hsi is quoted as saying, "If a person is bitten by a large, dangerous venomous snake (i.e. pit-viper), moxa should be burnt immediately upon the spot. This will give instant relief of the pain, and if it is not done death will follow; the marks of the teeth will show where the cautery is to be given." No doubt in Arabic or European medicine also cautery was customary in such cases, and it does not seem unreasonable to think that if a little delay occurred in the absorption of the venom into the circulation, destruction of the epithelial layers at the point of entry could save the patient (183).

In order to keep moxibustion in proper perspective, it must be noted that there are a few strict contraindications. Moxibustion must never be performed in cases of high fever, whether from the common cold or *yin* deficiency in the system. Scarring moxibustion must never be applied to the face or head, or in the vicinity of large blood vessels. Moxa must never be applied to either the abdominal or lumbrosacral regions of pregnant women (Cheng 346).

Contemporary physicians of Chinese medicine, who regularly employ acupuncture and moxibustion, should be fully versed in the management of all medical cases suggesting that moxibustion is the proper course of treatment. Its therapeutic application are researched and practiced extensively throughout clinics, hospitals, and medical departments all over the world. Perhaps there are still benefits of *Artemisia vulgaris* awaiting discovery.

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