



The Skeptics SA guide to Bach Flower Therapy

Since ancient times there has existed a belief, known as Vitalism, that the natural world contained a potent form of universal life-giving energy that animated and sustained life. This concept has been expressed in many different forms, one of which was that all plants possessed this special energy and that, in turn, this life-energy could be utilized for curing sickness and healing injuries.

Long before recorded history, *Homo sapiens* began to use plants for medicinal purposes. The earliest forms of plant therapies appear to have been based upon homogeneous principles, (also known as Sympathetic Magic or the Law of Similarities): this was a belief that if objects or substances had similar colours or shape to something else, then there was a subtle ‘spiritual’ connection between them. In applying these principles to the use of plants it was believed, for instance, that the most suitable herbs to treat a bleeding wound were red-coloured flowers or plants, while those with red stems, such as Mugwort, and rhubarb, were considered especially effective in the treatment of menstrual discharges, and to prevent haemorrhaging after child-birth; such bizarre ideas have persisted throughout history.

One of the more recent applications of this odd

belief that plants contain a ‘spiritual healing energy’ was Bach Flower Therapy, a concept devised by Dr Edward Bach, (1886 – 1936) MB, BS, MRCS, LRCP, DPH, a British physician and pathologist.

He noted that although patients might have a similar stature, and similar diseases, there were often differences in the time that it took them to recover. He formed the opinion that, over and above their body’s natural predisposition for recovery, patients needed some additional natural force; he concluded this was their emotional composition and, in particular, their attitude towards life.

This was not a new observation; for instance, Hippocrates had noted that ‘melancholic’ women were more susceptible to cancer than those of a sanguine or phlegmatic nature. Similar ideas were quite common in the 19th century. Influenced by the widespread interest in Mesmerism, Spiritualism, Transcendentalism, New Thought and Christian Science there was diverse opinions as to the actual origins of sickness and disease. While the medical profession attributed ill health to actual physical disorders, others claimed illness was simply a manifestation of disordered mental attitudes, or even that all forms of illness were merely figments of the individual’s imagination.

Bach appears to have been heavily influenced by a number of such metaphysical concepts, including a belief in the existence of the Soul and that it was reincarnated on a regular basis. He had a preoccupation with a spirit-body dichotomy, referring to the ‘Soul’, a spiritual component, and the Mind, which represented the physical body, with all its beliefs and attitudes. The relationship between the two parts of the individual being are somewhat reminiscent of the Gnostic teaching that the Soul was a spark of the divine light, the godhead, that had been placed in corporeal bodies, where it experienced the trials and temptations of human flesh. In similar fashion Bach suggested the Soul came from a superior plane of existence, and was reincarnated into a physical body. Yet, despite having a symbiotic relationship with that body, the Soul is the dominant component, ‘the real self’ (p 12); the body is merely a mundane vessel used to contain this transcendental Soul, and, as such, represents only ‘the minutest reflection’ (p 12) of the true being.

Reiterating another Gnostic concept, he believed that the influence of the physical body tended to overwhelm the true spiritual objectives of the Soul, so that, much of what individuals came to believe, and do, was actually

contrary to the higher, purer objectives of the Soul. He claimed that this constant conflict between the Soul and the Mind (body), could often be manifested in what were perceived, (in human terms), as physical or mental forms of 'disease'.

Although an orthodox practitioner, Bach became increasingly disillusioned with mainstream medicine and began to seek answers in the mystical, transcendental sphere, a quest that led him to adopt the vitalistic approach that it was necessary to treat the individual rather than the illness.

He eventually came to the conclusion that the actual causes of what were perceived as physical disorders were actually a number of negative emotional conditions, manifestations of the ongoing conflict between the Soul and physical part of the being, (the Mind). Since, as he believed, these were actually 'spiritual disorders' they could, "never be eradicated except by spiritual and mental effort." (Bach and Wheeler, 1997, p 10). He increasingly sought to find natural cures for these 'Soul' disorders, and in 1930 he abandoned his regular medical practice completely and withdrew to the countryside to continue his work looking for alternative forms of healing.

Bach claimed to possess such an extreme level of sensitivity that all he had to do was to either hold a flower in his hand, or place a petal on his tongue, to be able to intuitively determine the effects this flower would have on the body and the psyche. Using this process he gradually developed a compendium of flowers,

nineteen between 1928 and 1933 and a further nineteen in 1934 – 34, which he claimed could be used to counteract the influences of the negative emotional states that produced conflict between the Soul and the body. It appears that Bach saw in this 'healing process' an analogy of the interaction of the four elemental substances, earth, air, water and fire.

To the ancients all matter had been created from these four elements, all of which were believed to contain a basic elemental creative power. Bach believed that, as plants drew water up from the Earth, they drew with it the life-giving creative energy of the earth; to this was added the energy of the air, and finally, the fiery energy of the sunshine completed the process by 'heating' the plant to draw the energy out of the plant so that it could settle into the dew.

Since the quantity of the 'essence' was severely restricted by the limited quantity of dew that could form on a plant, Bach sought to replicate the process by other methods, The first of these, the 'sun method' involved picking the flowers on a warm day in the sunshine, and sprinkling them on water freshly drawn from a local spring, and placed in a glass container. This was then placed in the sunshine for a period between two to four hours, sufficient time, according to Bach, for the sunlight to transfer the 'vibrations' (the energy) of the flowers into the water. Once the water had absorbed this floral energy the flowers were removed and the water mixed with an equal amount of alcohol, usually Brandy, and then bottled. When used

to treat patients this solution would be further diluted with additional amounts of water. For those plants that did not bloom in the summer Bach employed a 'cooking method' of distillation, whereby the plant material was boiled in water, the plant material removed by filtration, the resulting solution mixed with an equal amount of alcohol, then bottled and used in the same fashion as that obtained by the sun method.

Bach Flower Therapy is essentially an amalgam of Vitalism and several other pseudo-scientific theories. One aspect of vitalism was that, rather like the strings of a huge musical instrument, all matter in the cosmos 'vibrated' at different frequencies. An ancient Hellenic concepts, based in part upon Pythagorean theory, it was believed that living beings vibrated at a specific frequency. This became the basis of an alternative concept known as 'vibrational medicine' the belief that humans have a 'dynamic energy system' that is attuned to the cosmic vibrational energy. While the human energy field remained 'in tune' with this infinite vibratory source, harmony prevailed, and they experienced good health and a positive life-style; however, if there was any form of interference with this cosmic connection, severe dissonance would result causing physical or mental disharmony in the in the life and health of the individual.

Bach proposed that although the reincarnated Soul, a fragment of the divine godhead, was 'imprisoned' within the physical body, it nevertheless retained a subtle connection to the

great field of universal energy, the supreme being that was its creator. However, because the Soul was often overwhelmed by, human frailties, the resulting conflict between the Soul and the Mind upset the energy potentials of both, severing, or at least interfering with, the psychic connection, creating a sense of disharmony, which produced an ever increasing sense of personal alienation and negativity; however, because the floral remedies had the same energy frequency as that of the godhead and the Soul, they were able to act as a medium, reuniting the Soul and the Mind so that the entire organism was once again attuned to the godhead. According to Bach each plant had a unique vibrational ‘energy-signature’ that was transferred into the dew, and that this vital-energy could be transmitted to the individual using his particular form of therapy, and that this process would then produce feelings of relaxation in the individual, and, more specifically, it would remedy the specific psychological disorders that were causing the disharmony between the Soul and the Mind.

There are many serious problems with the various concepts that are the basis of Bach Flower Therapy.

The first problem is that, while it purports to be a scientific theory, it is nothing of the sort: it is clearly based upon spiritual and religious concepts, a complex amalgam of Vitalism and Gnostic teachings.

Another serious problem is that the entire process is based upon the subjective, ‘intuitive’ observations of one individual, and as such,

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is not only unreliable but completely unscientific. While the term ‘intuitive feelings’ is an accepted part of alternative forms of therapy, it has no place in real science. Proper science is based upon objective research, where tests are repeated by numerous researchers and the results are always the same. The ‘impressions’ that Bach claimed to have perceived are scientifically invalid since they cannot be repeated.

Ultimately, one must ask if the Bach therapy actually works to which one must respond Yes and No!

It does work for certain people but only because, like all forms of alternative therapy, it relies heavily upon suggestion and the belief by the user in the efficacy of the process. In effect, when the Bach treatment is actually successful, it is merely an example of the placebo effect.

Various studies of the Bach method by various researchers, including Walach *et al* (2001), Ernst (2002) and Pintov *et al*, (2005), found that there was no evidence to suggest the Bach method was any more effective than a placebo: in other words, the process is an invalid form of treatment.

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