**Five Great Ayurvedic Herbs for the Mind and Memory**

**Karta Purkh Singh Khalsa, AD, DN-C, RH**

As our population ages, losing one's mental faculties can take first place on the list of concerns. Alzheimer's disease and other forms of senile dementia affect some 25 percent of all people over 80.[[1]](#footnote-0) Research, though, is revealing Ayurvedic approaches in treating and preventing mental decline.

Some types of mental decline develop when we are exposed to toxins and to oxidizing chemicals in our environment. All of these appear to contribute to brain inflammation, scarring and mental decay. Your brain may inflame may result from toxins, allergies, stress or low tissue nutrients. The process of inflammation creates free radicals that cause damage, which may contribute to senile dementia. These free radicals can be particularly damaging when brain tissues are deficient in antioxidants and other nutrients that ease the effects of chronic inflammation. Antioxidant levels in the brain have been shown to decline with age, and, the lower the level, the greater the damage to nerve cells.[[2]](#footnote-1) Antioxidants should top your list of brain nutrients. Fortunately, many time honored Ayurvedic herbs turn out to be potent antioxidants.

**Mental Rejuvenation with Ayurveda**

Medhya is an Ayurvedic concept that implies intellect, or wisdom. Medhya remedies promote mental development and act as mental therapy, and they also suggest a mind that is mighty, vigorous and pure.

There are many ways to bring medhya into play in the mind. Anything that promotes the sattva guna can help in our quest, and the yamas and niyamas of Patanjali are aimed at this. Ayurvedic herbal medicines also play a role. They engender and summon intelligence, memory and mental perception. They make the mind worthy of sacrifice to higher consciousness.

Bitter taste is made from air and ether energies, and these forces predominate in the mind. Bitter foods and herbs open the mind, increase sensitivity, awareness and mental functioning. Since bitter herbs are cooling and calming they combat mental dullness, allowing us to reach our full potential, becoming radiant and elevated.

 Mind medicines include a large array of herbs and foods recommended to rebuild body tissues and restore lubricating juices.[[3]](#footnote-2) Five of these mind nourishing herbs stand out as pillars of an Ayurvedic lifestyle.

Ashwagandha, sometimes named “winter cherry”, is a top mental rejuvenator. Ayurvedic herbalists use the herb to reestablish long-term sleep rhythms. Ayurvedic herbalism also uses Ashwagandha for general debility and exhaustion, memory loss and nerve diseases. Modern clinicians are most likely to employ it for chronic fatigue and anxiety, as well as insomnia.

This tonic herb, a relative of tomatoes and potatoes, is not stimulating, but rather relaxing. That allows us to take much higher doses, with no overstimulation, so this root is a superb remedy for nervous exhaustion.

Study after study continues to confirm the stress tolerance, performance and endurance enhancing benefits of this herb.[[4]](#footnote-3) [[5]](#footnote-4) [[6]](#footnote-5) One study indicated that the herb reduced brain damage caused by stress by 80%.[[7]](#footnote-6) In another, Ashwagandha was shown to increase physical working capacity, increase the size of the heart and the content of blood sugar fuel in the heart and liver.[[8]](#footnote-7) [[9]](#footnote-8)

Ayurveda considers it a “grounding” herb, one that nourishes and regulates metabolic processes and stabilizes mood. One study concluded, “The investigations support the use of Withania somnifera as a mood stabilizer in clinical conditions of anxiety and depression in Ayurveda.”[[10]](#footnote-9) Ashwagandha increases memory and test performance.[[11]](#footnote-10) One recent study looked at sleep deprivation and stress. Ashwagandha was effective in improving sleep, and was found to also have an action on the brain’s GABA mechanism.[[12]](#footnote-11)

As well as being a slow-acting tonic herb, Ashwagandha is a superb herb for treating chronic anxiety, which is a sign of elevated vata, and a common problem as age advances. It takes about a week to work up to the proper dose, and about another week for the herb to reach maximum effectiveness. Since Ashwagandha is a slow-acting herb, you may take your daily dose at any time during the day. Used this way, Ashwagandha prevents the onset of the anxiety episode. It also has antioxidant activity in the brain,[[13]](#footnote-12) which may explain, at least in part, a host of its effects, including the reported anti-stress, cognition-facilitating, anti-inflammatory and anti-aging benefits.

A typical dose of Ashwagandha is about a gram per day, taken over long periods, up to many years, as a rejuvenator, but, since Ashwagandha is very safe, larger quantities are often used short term. In India, Withania is given with pungent, heating herbs (ginger, pepper, etc.) to ensure that it gets sufficiently digested.

Conscious communication is the essence of yoga. From your chakras to your nervous system to the words you speak, your very molecules are vibrating with the energy of your being, and transmitting that energy to all the other parts of our bodies and to people in your life.

 Yoga exercises, pranayama and lifestyle practices all support conscious communication, and there is one special herb that yoga reveres above all others for clarifying and expanding that special spiritual voice we all share.

Calamus root is a major herb for the mind and meditation, and is highly revered by yogis. Ancient yogis and seers used this herb and itis said to stimulate the power of self-expression and to enhance intelligence. Calamus promotes circulation to the brain, sharpens memory, enhances awareness and increases communication and self-expression. The yogic name, *Vacha*, means “speech”, referring to its action on the fifth chakra and its propensity to help you speak from your highest consciousness.

This herb is often combined with gotu kola, which is cooling and mild. The complementary energetics makes the combination suitable for a wide variety of people.

For insomnia caused by the air tattva, calamus will warm and pacify the errant energy. Use a daily dose taken with meals, to have a gradual effect.

For attention deficit disorders, it combines well with gotu kola, jatamansi, shankhapushpi and licorice. Over the long term, calamus will warm the body and pacify the mind. Vacha is combined with triphala as a general rejuvenative that bestows intelligence, longevity and good memory.[[14]](#footnote-13)

Vacha is a potent herb, so the effective dose is quite reasonable, which helps people take it regularly. Use 1 to 4 grams per day, and work up gradually to the effective dose, being mindful of the possible queasiness.

Vacha has a long and very special history in Ayurveda. For meditating yogis, it can be quite a boost. If you’ve been contemplating improving your communication, concentration, attention and meditation, this little root might be just the herb for you.

Thinking about thinking? Feel like you’re about to max out your personal hard drive? Gotu kola is an herb with a long history of brain building. Gotu kola, also called Mandukaparni, is a mainstay of herbal medicine in Ayurveda. Widely considered a superior herb for the nervous system, gotu kola has a host of benefits.[[15]](#footnote-14)

In Ayurvedic medicine, this herb is called “brahmi”, which means “godlike”, a reference to its anti-aging properties and to its use as an aid to meditation. It has a bitter taste and is cooling to the body.

Gotu kola strengthens memory, concentration and intelligence and promotes longevity, improves the voice, physical strength and the complexion. This medicine is used to treat age-related diseases as diverse as senility and hair loss.

Gotu kola is a low growing jungle herb that grows in hot moist climates. After all, it’s the food of the elephants, and we all know about their memories! Fresh, it’s a delicious salad vegetable. The juice of the fresh leaves is available at some juice bars.

More recently, a study out of Korea shows that constituents in gotu kola show potential for treating Alzheimer’s disease, a very promising direction.[[16]](#footnote-15)

Since gotu kola is basically a mild salad vegetable, the dose can be very high. Try one to four teaspoonfuls of fresh juice every morning. Many people use a modest dose of 1 gram per day in capsules for daily rejuvenation. Try a cup of gotu kola tea with honey before meditation.

Do you ever find yourself in the kitchen without a clue about why you came in there? No, not you. Whatever it was, it must have been important, for here you are. Maybe if you go back out into the living room, you’ll magically remember why you traipsed to the kitchen. Or, just maybe, some herbal medicine can jog that aging memory.

Brahmi, or water hyssop (*Bacopa monnieri*), is a steadfast mainstay of traditional Ayurvedic medicine. It’s used in Asia for nerve diseases, mental exhaustion and to improve memory—it’s a powerful brain food. Meditators use it to increase comprehension, concentration and recollection. Because it increases the ability to solve problems effectively, it is often found in Ayurvedic formulas to prevent stress.

With nearly 300 studies in the scientific literature, it has built up a solid base of scientific support for its many functions. This powerhouse also does double duty as a nerve tissue builder, diuretic, sedative and tonic and anti-stress remedy. And if that’s not enough, it’s also employed in anxiety, epilepsy, neurasthenia and emotional stress.

In support of the traditional use for enhancing memory, Australian researchers recently gave Bacopa to seventy-six adults, aged 40 to 65 years, in a double-blind randomized, placebo control study in which various memory functions and anxiety levels were tested and measured. Numerous memory tests before and after taking the brahmi showed that the herb significantly improved the retention of new information Follow-up tests showed that the learning rate remained the same, so it looks like brahmi reduces the rate of forgetting of newly acquired information.

Brahmi is safe and effective for children. Indian schoolchildren take it at home. In 1987, Indian scientists gave brahmi to 40 schoolchildren aged 6-8 in a single-blind trial. The tots improved in maze learning, immediate memory and perception. Their reaction/performance times all improved. The dose was 1 gram per day for three months, of the dried plant extracted into a syrup form. No side-effects were recorded.

In India, gotu kola is used interchangeably with Bacopa. Both are called “brahmi”.

The typical dose is two grams of the whole herb, in capsules or tea, twice a day with warm water.

When we need mental peace and sleep, we may call upon shankhapushpi to help restore clear quality of the mind and relaxation. Its flowers resemble the shankh or conch shell, thus the name. It usually is a foot tall plant, with a dome of flowers, in open fields in North India.

This herb is an outstanding rejuvenative tonic for the mind and nerve tissue. The plant is said to have profound mystical properties, with an affinity for the heart, throat, third eye and crown chakras.

The herb is especially effective for mental disorders of anxiety and fear. Often taken with or prepared in ghee, it promotes tranquility without dulling the mind. In depression, it uplifts. In mania it is calming. Students may use it for exam phobia. For attention deficit disorders, it combines well with brahmi, jatamansi, calamus and licorice. For sleep, use shankhapushpi at a dose of about 6 grams at bedtime. Ghee, cooked three times with shankhapushpi juice and milk, makes even the dullest mind sharp.

Ayurveda places special attention on the health of the mind, and fundamentally teaches that, ultimately, all physical diseases start in the mind, so a healthy mind is at the forefront of Ayurvedic healing practices. These five herbs form the core of a superb mental medicine chest. They are waiting to help us stay calm, centered, intelligent and exalted, so now might just be the time to give this collection of remedies a try.

1. Jill Stansbury, N.D., *Sustain the Brain*, Nutrition Science News, February, 2001, http://www.healthwellexchange.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Fariello RG. Peroxidative stress and cerebral aging. Int J Clin Pharmacol Res 1990;10(1-2):49-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Sharma, Ram, and Dash, Bhagwan, *Caraka Samhita*, Chowkhamba, Varanasi, 1992 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Archana R, Namasivayam A. Antistressor effect of Withania somnifera. J Ethnopharmacol 1999 Jan;64(1):91-3 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Singh B, Saxena AK, Chandan BK, Gupta DK, Bhutani KK, Anand KK. Adaptogenic activity of a novel, withanolide-free aqueous fraction from the roots of Withania somnifera Dun. Phytother Res 2001 Jun;15(4):311-318 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Venkatraghavan S, et al, *J Res Ayu Sid*, 1, 1980:370. [from: Bone K, “Withania somnifera”, *Clinical Applications of Ayurvedic and Chinese Herbs*, (Queensland, Australia: Phytotherapy Press), 1996:137-41.] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. Jain S, Shukla SD, Sharma K, Bhatnagar M. Neuroprotective Effects of Withania somnifera Dunn. in Hippocampal Sub-regions of Female Albino Rat. Phytother Res 2001 Sep;15(6):544-548 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Dhuley JN. Adaptogenic and cardioprotective action of ashwagandha in rats and frogs. J Ethnopharmacol 2000 Apr;70(1):57-63 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Bhattacharya SK, Bhattacharya A, Chakrabarti A. Adaptogenic activity of Siotone, a polyherbal formulation of Ayurvedic rasayanas. Indian J Exp Biol 2000 Feb;38(2):119-28 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. Bhattacharya SK, Bhattacharya A, Sairam K, Ghosal S. Anxiolytic-antidepressant activity of Withania somnifera glycowithanolides: an experimental study. Phytomedicine 2000 Dec;7(6):463-9 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Dhuley JN. Nootropic-like effect of ashwagandha (Withania somnifera L.) in mice. Phytother Res 2001 Sep;15(6):524-528 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. Kumar A, Kalonia H. Effect of Withania somnifera on Sleep-Wake Cycle in Sleep-Disturbed Rats: Possible GABAergic Mechanism. Indian J Pharm Sci. 2008 Nov;70(6):806-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Bhattacharya A, Ghosal S, Bhattacharya SK. Anti-oxidant effect of Withania somnifera glycowithanolides in chronic footshock stress-induced perturbations of oxidative free radical scavenging enzymes and lipid peroxidation in rat frontal cortex and striatum. J Ethnopharmacol 2001 Jan;74(1):1-6 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
14. Srikantha Murthy, K.R. *Vagbhata’s Astanga Hrdayam*. vol. 3. Varanasi: Krishnadas Academy. 1995. p. 387 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
15. Vaidya, Ashok D.B. The Status And Scope Of Indian Medicinal Plants Acting On Central Nervous System. Indian J Pharmacol 1997; 29: S340-S343 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
16. Mook-Jung I, Shin JE, Yun SH, Huh K, Koh JY, Park HK, Jew SS, Jung MW.Protective effects of asiaticoside derivatives against beta-amyloid neurotoxicity. *J Neurosci Res* 1999; Nov 1;58(3):417-25 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)