



a gateway of understanding

# The Role of the Host Tree in Mistletoe Therapy

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**T**he scientific understanding of mistletoe has advanced greatly against the imaginative backdrop presented out of spiritual science by Rudolf Steiner, PhD. Yet, as Dr. Steiner so often elaborated, the results of spiritual science can always be validated scientifically (and in many cases that has already proven true). This article is an opportunity to explore how the parasitic

mistletoe plant, that grows high up in different species of host trees takes on the qualities of its host environment—which it can then gift back to us. The spectrum of these qualities allows us to individualize mistletoe therapy for each patient thereby enhancing its benefits. Mistletoe (*Viscum album*) therapy represents a new form of medicine because it heals not just the physical body,

but also reconnects us to the spiritual forces that direct, regulate, and integrate us in body, mind, and spirit. We see this reflected in the capacity of mistletoe to not only treat cancer, but to improve sleep, depression, pain, and appetite by reconnecting the human being to the universal healing rhythms within themselves. These, often mysterious, rhythms exist all around us in the constant life-sustaining and cyclical forces of nature, moon, planets, and the sun stars around us.

Rudolf Steiner often spoke about modern mistletoe as having ancient origins linked back into pre-earthly times when plants were still ensouled. For instance, if one were to hurtfully step upon them, they would express a sentient response. Mistletoe has its origins in these ancient times. Rudolf Steiner referred to these times as “old-moon” evolution. The majestic Nordic myth of Baldur and Loci speaks imaginatively to the destiny of mistletoe in a beautiful way ever so pertinent to our current age. Baldur was beloved amongst the Gods and humankind. He took interest in humanity and wanted to cultivate in human beings the consciousness of the mighty Odin and the gods, as spiritual wisdom. Baldur always lived with a haunting premonition of his death and thus the goddess Frigg protected him by beseeching the elements, plants, and animals of the Earth not harm or kill him. But Loci deceitfully learned the secret of the mysterious mistletoe that lived above the soil and was not of the Earth. Loci fashioned an arrow and gave it to the blind one called Hodur and coaxed him to shoot it at Baldur. Hodur, in his blind ignorance, killed Baldur. For those of you interested in an anthroposophic view of modern illness, Rudolf Steiner suggested in this way the legend depicts how the actions of Loci severed the consciousness of the gods from humanity—so he could lead them into a time of darkness, selfishness, and untruthfulness which in the deepest spiritual

sense would become the source of modern illness.<sup>1</sup>

Cancer is in many ways a symbol of our modern materialistic times. We might imagine transforming mistletoe into a medicine is a redemption for the harm caused to Baldur and humanity. Rudolf Steiner suggested just giving mistletoe was a small part of its potential as a healing plant. Research and clinical practice suggest there is much more to learn about how to use it to serve humanity and treat cancer (and other degenerative diseases) mounting in our times. Learning about the host trees may well be an example of how we can better understand mistletoe and how to enhance its effects. As we described earlier, mistletoe has a remnant of the ancient capacity of ensoulment. Matching the qualities of the host tree with the social and personal nature of the patient is an intuitive medical art. Let us try to explore some fundamental insights into this aspect of mistletoe therapy and host-trees.

Before a prescriber looks to match the host-tree, they need to see the individual person in front of them. In anthroposophic medicine, looking for how the four elements are living in a person is a helpful way to start. (Although it is beyond the scope of this article choosing a metal therapy such as potentized iron, lead, copper, gold et cetera. can also be an additional consideration to optimize an individualized therapy and support the choice of the host tree used in therapy.)

**EARTH BODY:** Where is the disease? What is the main organ and how is it evolving? What is the stage of the disease and what is strong or depleted in the body? What needs replenishment and support?

**WATER/ETHERIC BODY:** What is the person's life phase, memory, and vitality? What is his or her constitutional disposition? Is the patient worsening, maintaining, or improving. What other symptoms are presenting? Which symptoms reveal

the dynamics of health? Where are the forces of growth and regeneration too strong or too weak?

**AIR BODY/ASTRAL BODY:** What are the soul qualities, temperament, and personality or character traits of the person? What planetary soul type is present or therapeutic?

**FIRE BODY/I:** What is the creative-signature of the individual? What are their resources and strivings for the future? With what mood is the patient looking at the future? What is essential for this to heal and what is needed to help the person achieve their self-potential? How do these things find reflection in the characteristics and individuality of the host tree?

As we can see, mistletoe therapy can be a very individualized process. Process highlights it is not stagnant. People have different sides to them and the illness itself might dictate a specific therapy—which could also change through the healing process. People evolve and sometimes their doctors must change or alternate the type of host tree (or additional treatments). The diligent physician is always looking to see how the patient responds in their warmth-body, vitality, mood, forces for initiative, and markers of self-regulation and homeostasis.

The characteristics of the host tree can be understood by studying the botany, phytopharmacology, mythology, and through careful phenomenological or Goethean observation. Scientifically we can determine the quantity and relationships of the active substances derived from any particular host tree mistletoe. It is possible to prescribe from this point of view alone. The knowledge and experience of the physician and receptivity of the patient will determine how which mistletoe is prescribed.

Often a first question is whether a coniferous tree or a deciduous host tree be better. The coniferous trees (*Abietis* or *Pini*) are frequently good for patients actively on chemotherapy or radiation treatment. Those with reduced vitality, cachexia, edema, and brain involvement do well. Also, those who are sensitive to lectin-rich mistletoe and are depleted respond to these trees. Many physicians choose these host trees for lymphomas, as well (where regulation may be more important than a strong attack on the cancer cells themselves). Most other trees come under the deciduous category where particular trees are chosen for specific tumor types and organs—especially of the metabolic and reproductive system. These host-trees are more likely

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to produce fever (depending on the pharmaceutical process used). They are also more commonly used in Europe for intra-tumor, peritoneal, and pleural injections.

Let us look at two host trees from a more constitutional perspective. The fir (*Abies*) tree stands majestic throughout the year bringing a memory of life, breathing, and vitality even through the long cold winters. For Hildegard of Bingen, the fir tree represented strength and the ability to ward off ghosts and phantoms. It was also a favorite of Sebastian Kneipp, who was a Bavarian priest and one of the forefathers of the naturopathic medicine movement. The resin became common throughout Europe to ward off coughs, colds, weak lungs, and bronchitis. Fir was also used when a person felt a wintry cold inside them, especially in the lung, stomach, or blood. The fir host tree mistletoe patient tends to feel responsible for others, isolates themselves, often standing alone. They perceive what is needed in diverse social situations, but can also be seen as stubborn, stuck, and inflexible. In this constitutional type, cancers of the esophagus, lungs, stomach intestines, and prostate are more common with metastasis to the spinal column and nervous system.

The oak (*Quercus*) stands as one of the mightiest and well-known trees of the western world. It is deeply revered in Norse, Celtic, and Germanic mythology. The oak tree has been revered as the tree of fertility, knowledge, strength, abundance, and freedom in society. In this way, it shares some qualities with the linden tree (called lime trees in the British Isles, despite being unrelated to the citrus trees that produce lime fruit). We could say that the lime with its heart-shaped leaves, sweet smell, and more delicate form represents the feminine qualities of social discourse and the oak the more austere and masculine side. More about this can be gleaned from the mythology of Philemon and Baucis who were changed into a lime and oak tree respectively. The oak is the strongest of woods and is used to make strong barrels, furniture, and many of the floors we walk upon. In Western traditional medicine, oak was used for infections of the intestine or bladder, for inflammations of the mucous membranes, lymphatic conditions, skin rashes, varicose veins, and hemorrhoids (effectively used today in many anthroposophic medicines and naturopathy). Mistletoe grown on oak trees is often used for those who have worked hard all their lives—those who don't permit themselves to show weakness. Often times such people are disconnected from

their artistic potential, feelings, and struggle to enjoy leisure and fun. Often these patients are athletic in their build and feel worthy only through their work and accomplishments in the material world. Patients exhibit masculine qualities and often get cancers of the gall bladder, liver, prostate, or bones.

Ayurvedic medicine especially pose this challenge to conventional science because individual medicines cannot be evaluated without the knowledge and experience of the practitioner. However, the debate is healthy and hopefully special medicines like mistletoe will open doors again to the knowledge of Baldur and the con-

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This summary just touches lightly on the subject of host trees and mistletoe. Mistletoe has been produced on many types of trees. Oak, apple, fir, pine, and ash are probably the most often used by prescribers. Having just returned from the Society for Integrative Oncology conference in NYC (see article [page 24](#) in this issue), it was encouraging to see great interest in mistletoe therapy. Also, to witness the palpable struggle amongst researchers at the SIO over how to evaluate the constitutional aspects of a medical or healing tradition. Anthroposophic medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, naturopathy and

consciousness of the gods to bridge the divide between the physical and spiritual dimensions of health. It is always important to remember disease pathology is not abnormal, it is a normal response to what is imbalanced. Mistletoe offers us a gateway of understanding into how to treat disease by recreating health in the body, mind, and spirit of the human being. 🌲

<sup>1</sup> *The Mission of the Folk Souls*, Lecture 9. Rudolf Steiner Press; 2nd edition (1970)

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