

# Viscum Album—Magical Plant of Complexity and Paradox

## Part I: Mistletoe—Past, Present, and Future

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### Abstract

#### Keywords

- ▶ Viscum album
- ▶ Rudolf Steiner
- ▶ Mistletoe therapy
- ▶ Anthroposophic medicine
- ▶ Cancer
- ▶ Metamorphosis
- ▶ Druids
- ▶ Dreams

This article covers the history of *Viscum album* as a homeopathic remedy from 1850 up to the present day, as well as the use of mistletoe in traditional herbalism. The natural history of the plant and its folklore are discussed. Its contemporary use as a cancer remedy in anthroposophic medicine for the treatment of cancer is explained as well as Rudolf Steiner's theory of etiology of cancer and why he chose mistletoe as a primary treatment for that disease. There is a final discussion on recent dream provings of the remedy.

### Introduction

*Viscum album* (–Figs. 1 and 2) is not a newcomer to the homeopathic materia medica. It was proved around 1850 by an Austrian homeopath, Dr. William Huber. In 1899 George Black wrote a monograph on *Viscum album* and did his own proving. In the preface of this 79-page pamphlet, Black wrote:

My object in publishing this treatise is to direct the attention of my colleagues to a medicine which I believe to be remedial in a degree beyond anything that its present use would suggest. That it has long been held in high esteem by individual members of the profession will, I think, be apparent from the evidence adduced in these pages, but it seems to me to merit more general recognition and a wider field of action than any it has had, at any rate, in our day.<sup>1</sup>

More than a century after Black wrote his pamphlet, *Viscum album* is still underused as a homeopathic remedy. It seems worthwhile to revisit this remedy given its wide use in anthroposophic medicine for the treatment of cancer, its history of treatment of epilepsy, sciatica, deafness and heart

disease by early homeopaths, as well as being held in high regard by ancient herbalists.

In my investigation of mistletoe, I have joined others in finding that it is a most complex plant with unusual properties as well as a profound healing substance. The difficulty that occurs when attempting to understand mistletoe is the hidden nature of its essence. *Viscum album* is a remedy of complexity and paradox, not unlike the nest of intertwined stems that make up the globe of mistletoe suspended in the branches of a tree.

Historically, studies around the mistletoe have led researchers on a lengthy path, requiring much more time and effort than was thought. It is as if the mistletoe has the ability to capture the imagination of the researcher and then lead him or her into a maze that appears to be unending. The energy of the mistletoe continually enfolds into itself, carefully guarding its secrets.

In 1907, botanist Karl von Tubeuf wrote what became an 800-page monograph on mistletoe. He concluded that there was nothing normal about this plant. Nothing about the way that mistletoe grows or the way that it regenerates itself is normal in the world of plants. Rudolf Steiner said something similar. He wrote that the way in which mistletoe grows and



Fig. 1 Mistletoe.



Fig. 2 White-berry mistletoe.

its 'contradictory nature' is what makes it an important medicine.

Though the homeopathic provings and clinical experience of mistletoe reveal its usefulness in numerous pathologies, there is little specific indication. There are few modalities, strange, rare or peculiar symptoms or sensations that indicate the individual's response to the disease. The rare mental symptoms that appear are mostly vague feelings such as being ungrounded, floating in air, lightheaded and dizzy. We see many examples of this ungrounded state in the provings. However, this valuable and timely remedy continues to be underprescribed because it is difficult to understand. It seems nebulous. The symptoms don't fit into a coherent pattern or theme. It shows no central core and does not easily reveal its themes. As we shall later see, this is an essential part of the remedy picture.

Part I of this article reveals the portrait of this remedy through its natural history, presence in folklore, use in ancient herbalism as well as in anthroposophy, followed by the provings and clinical data available in our materia medica. Part II explores the remedy through the symbolic realm of mythology in an attempt to reveal its essence. After presenting what I hope is an understandable and useful picture of

this remedy, I will conclude with some clinical information from my experience.

## Natural History

Mistletoe is a plant filled with paradox. Though most plants grow from seeds that require darkness to germinate, the seed of the mistletoe requires light. It lives not within the earth as do most plants, but in the bark of trees.

The seeds are dispersed by birds or by the wind, landing on the branches of trees and thriving only on the same tree as the original plant. Upon germination, a root-like structure, called a *radicle*, emerges from the germinated seed and grows along the surface of the branch. When it encounters an irregularity in the bark, the radicle produces a cementing substance to hold it to the bark. A peg then forms that penetrates into the cortex of the host. It is through this peg that the mistletoe absorbs nutrients and water from the host tree.

After about a year, the mistletoe begins to produce foliage, growing larger and producing a branched, golden-coloured woody stem and leathery leaves. It is a semiparasite, as it produces its own chlorophyll in addition to living off of the water and nutrients of the host tree.

Eventually, it forms into a large globe, which can be easily seen in winter when the leaves fall off of the host tree. At that time, the mistletoe leaves turn yellow, and it appears as the large golden globe that is the subject of ancient lore.

In mid-autumn small, pearl-like berries form, maturing in early winter. Some of the berries simply break off the plant and fall to lower branches creating new infections on the same tree. Others become food for birds. The berries contain viscin, a sticky substance that makes it difficult to swallow. The bird wipes its beak on a branch and the seed or berry sticks to a new branch. The seeds can also move through the digestive system of the bird and are deposited through bird droppings on a tree. Thus, the derivation of the less than elegant name, dung stick from *mistel* meaning dung and *tan* referring to twig.

There are male and female mistletoe. Plants of both sexes are necessary for insect pollination. The male plants are slightly yellow, more pendulous, and do not have any berries. Female plants have tiny yellow flowers that bloom in late winter, followed by translucent white or yellowish berries. Though large infestations of mistletoe can kill a tree, it is also useful to its environment. A large number of animals depend on it for food and the large globes serve as nesting sites for birds.

The plant is poisonous, containing the toxic lectin, viscumin, found only in mistletoe. It is a cytotoxic protein, but its biological activity is thought to depend on the host tree and time of harvest.

Common host trees for *Viscum album* in the United Kingdom are apple, poplar, lime and hawthorne. Though much ancient lore speaks of the mistletoe growing on oak, it is rarely found on that tree. Unfortunately, most of the provings in our materia medica do not indicate from which tree the mistletoe was taken.

*Viscum album* belongs to the order *Santalales* and family *Santalaceae*. The family *Santalaceae*, or sandalwood family, consists of around 400 species of hemiparasitic plants. Two plants from this family in the homeopathic material medica

include *Oleum santali*, sandalwood oil, and *Okoubaka aubrevillei*, a tropical rainforest tree growing in West Africa.

## Ancient Writings and Folklore

Mistletoe was known to the ancient Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder (AD 23–AD 79). Pliny wrote in his *Naturalis Historia* of the ritual harvesting of mistletoe by the Druids, to whom the plant was sacred. The plant was harvested at the winter solstice with a golden sickle, the gold representing the sun and the sickle shape representing the crescent moon. The symbolism of the sun and the moon indicated the union of masculine and feminine and the mistletoe harvested in this way was thought to increase fertility.

Though it was rare for mistletoe to grow on oaks, the Druids chose the oak mistletoe for their ceremonies, as it was thought to contain mystical healing powers. The plant was cut from the tree and caught by a white cloth. It was not allowed to touch the ground for to do so would negate its special powers.

The 12th-century Benedictine abbess and visionary *Hildegard of Bingen* recommended mistletoe from a pear tree in a formula with *Asarum* and nutmeg for internal ulcers and lung infections.<sup>2</sup> For external application, she suggests pear mistletoe, combined with olive oil, deer tallow and spikenard for anointing an area afflicted by gout. (ibid. 107)

In the 13th century, Albertus Magnus wrote that mistletoe, when taken with Martagon 'openeth all locks'.<sup>3</sup>

Nicholas Culpeper, the 17th-century English physician, astrologer and herbalist wrote: 'Mistletoe is under the influence of the sun and when growing on oaks participates in the nature of Jupiter'. He recommends powders of mistletoe for epilepsy, palsy, and apoplexy as well as pleurisy. He also suggests the sticky substance from the berries is useful for drawing out tumours and infected 'hard knots'. Like many others, Culpeper was impressed with the fact that the plant has been held in high esteem by many. It has been named, he writes, *lignum sanctae crucis*, or wood of the holy cross. Those who called it so may have meant to honour its healing ability, but the name is actually a reference to quite a different story. The mistletoe, so the story goes, was once a tree that the cross on which Christ was crucified was made. In punishment for that, the mistletoe became a parasite, forced to live on other trees.

As for the tradition of kissing under the mistletoe, there are many suggestions as how it began. Some say it is related to the early Druid legends of the plant symbolising fertility and the union of masculine and feminine. Others have written of an origin in Scandinavian myth where enemies meeting in a forest under the mistletoe, must lay down their weapons and remain in peace until the following day.

## Mistletoe in Anthroposophic Medicine

Rudolf Steiner introduced mistletoe therapy into *Anthroposophy* in 1920. Like many of his predecessors, Steiner was intrigued by the unusual qualities of the plant and felt that it was a clue to its medicinal value. The fact that mistletoe is a parasite growing above the earth and not in it and that it blooms in the winter rather than the summer indicated to

him that it was a plant that had 'gone mad' and did everything at the wrong time. He also noted the method in which the plant was fertilised.

The peculiar 'madness' of this plant is shown in its method of fertilization, which depends on transport by birds from one tree to another. The plant would become extinct were it not for this service of the birds. In a curious way, the fertilizing elements of the mistletoe choose the path through the birds, and are excreted on another tree trunk or branch, where the 'take root' anew. All these peculiarities illuminate the whole formative process of the mistletoe.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, he felt it was an important remedy for cancer, where the cells of the body have gone mad, overwhelming the life force of the individual. Today mistletoe therapy is one of the most widely studied alternative therapies for cancer. In Europe, it is used, in addition to conventional cancer therapies, for 6 out of 10 cancer patients. Clinical studies show it improves appetite, sleep and increases resistance to infection. Increased survival rates and/or improved quality of life are also reported.

Mistletoe preparations are manufactured under various names, *Iscador* being the original and most frequently prescribed. These extracts are made from the leaves, berries and stems of the plant and are available in various homeopathic potencies as well as physical doses. Physicians often prescribe it in physical doses, injecting it under the skin of the abdomen or directly into the tumour, though Steiner originally felt that it should be given in potency. He points out that the method of preparation is extremely important.

The task is to blend the glutinous substance of the mistletoe in the right way with the triturating medium, and so increase gradually the potency of the viscum substance to a very high degree.<sup>4</sup>

One of the physicians currently using mistletoe therapy is anthroposophic doctor and homeopath, Johannes Wilkens. His practice at the Alexander Von Humboldt Clinic in Bad Steben, Germany, focuses on the treatment of cancer, neurologic diseases and respiratory ailments using optimised mistletoe therapy. His book *Mistletoe Therapy for Cancer* is an excellent overview on the subject and discusses how to optimise the treatment by differentiating the remedy needed according to the host tree and the related metal.

Each mistletoe therapy is of course a very individual treatment. The substances used, the dose and timing of the medications given cannot be reduced to a uniform pattern, but change from one case to another. .... However, according to Rudolf Steiner, in order to optimize the effectiveness of mistletoe treatments we must expand the method in two important aspects: before beginning therapy, a typological relationship between the host tree and the patient must be clarified, something to which up to now insufficient attention has been paid. Additionally, metal substances should be mixed with the mistletoe's

active ingredients that have been selected for the treatment. According to Steiner, this combination can markedly increase the curative possibilities with cancer.<sup>5</sup>

According to Dr. Wilkens, mistletoe therapy is performed primarily through injection, but you can also use the oral remedies. From his perspective, what is more important is that it is prepared as a homeopathic dilution and optimised to fit the individual. (Johannes Wilkens, e-mail message April 3, 2012).

Ralph Twentyman, another homeopath trained in anthroposophic medicine, had much experience with mistletoe therapy, specifically Iscador. In *The Science and Art of Healing*, he writes about Steiner's ideas on the development of cancer as it relates to the ongoing process of growth and development. Steiner referred to this process as metamorphosis. According to Steiner, metamorphosis is an ongoing and necessary process within the organism. In childhood, it is primarily about growth of the physical organism, but, if the individual does not use these forces later in his/her life, they become greater than the actual need. The question is—what becomes of these forces? In the following paragraph, Twentyman relates the lack of continual metamorphosis during a lifetime to the development of cancer.

The task of education into metamorphosis after the change of teeth, is to lead these forces from the sphere of organic life into the soul realm as thinking and imagination. This metamorphosis calls for methods more artistic than intellectual in style. Intellectual methods fail to lead over these forces and then some of them remain behind in the organic depths as islands of untransformed growth forces. If these forces are unable to find their way, through inadequate educational methods, into progressive upward metamorphosis then we can be sure they will not stay still but will regress, atavistically. In this way islands of regressed forces are formed in the organism to become nuclei of potential tumor formation.<sup>6</sup>

After many years of experience with mistletoe extract, Twentyman states that he has seen a relationship between the healing that takes place after Iscador and the unearthing of these suppressed forces.

As I have worked for many years with the anthroposophical mistletoe remedy, Iscador, in cancer, I must mention an aspect of its use in addition to its pharmacological cytotoxic and immune stimulating actions. It seems to open up and release the buried forces we have been discussing. It makes it easier for the patients to accept new impulses awakening in them, even if to their customary stereotyped viewpoints these are childish or bizarre.<sup>6</sup>

These findings on the use of Iscador are reminiscent of Albertus Magnus' claim that 'mistletoe opens all locks' and are, as we shall later see, very similar to the action of the homeopathic remedy *Viscum album*.

## Homeopathic Clinical Information and Provings of *Viscum Album*

### Early Provings

Dr. W. Huber did the first homeopathic proving of *Viscum album* around 1850 using mainly the third and sixth decimal dilutions. He consequently felt that it was an important remedy for neuralgias, deafness and asthma, associated with rheumatism, comparing it to *Aconitum napellus*, *Bryonia alba*, *Pulsatilla*, *Rhododendron*, *Rhus toxicodendron*, and *Spigelia*. He also found it useful for uterine haemorrhage during the climacteric period and, in place of ergot, as an oxytocic for expulsion of the placenta.<sup>7</sup>

Dr. George Black and several of his colleagues conducted a proving later in the 19th century using the tincture and third decimal potency. Like Huber, Black found *Viscum album* to be useful as an oxytocic, for rheumatism, and impaired hearing, most likely using the information from Huber. Like the early herbalists, he used it for many types of convulsions and epileptic seizures and found it curative from many types of vertigo, especially rheumatic vertigo. His comments on the indications of mistletoe for St. Vitus Dance (*Sydenham's chorea*) are of interest to the contemporary prescriber.<sup>1</sup>

Though this type of chorea is quite rare, the symptoms Black describes may be familiar to the homeopath treating children with ADHD. According to Black, there are grimaces, twitches (with no benefit from *Hyoscyamus niger*, *Cuprum metallicum* or *Ignatia amara*). He compares it also to *Agaricus muscarius*, *Zincum metallicum* and *Belladonna* with constant agitation, inability to sit still for even a few seconds, and a distressed and vacant expression on face. The patient can't write clearly because of lack of control of muscles and there may be diplopia as in *Stramonium*.

Black also mentions provings done by Proll, who proved the tincture and 'felt the sensation of a large spider crawling over his hand, a feeling as if he would fall, and a glow rising up in him, as if he were on fire.'<sup>1</sup> In the same book, there are accounts of poisonings that resulted in opiate-like symptoms, including giddiness, drowsiness and stupor.

### Modern Provings

F. Stockebrand and K. A. Kass proved *Viscum album* in 1957 using low potencies up to the 30th decimal potency. The proving, which was originally in German, is included in *James Stephenson's Hahnemannian Provings*.<sup>3</sup> Information about this proving also appears in *Psyche and Substance*. Dr. Edward Whitmont recounts a case of a 4-year-old boy with bronchial asthma. He then describes the symptoms of *Viscum album* from the Stockebrand and Kass proving.

The *Viscum* patient is sad, tired, feels worn out, is apathetic but restless at the same time, oversensitive to noise, has an aversion to people, wants to be left alone, cannot react adequately to people. There is a tendency to go to extremes: overstimulation, intense almost manic ability to react, as well as, more often, a depressive sensitivity. Vertigo is a leading symptom. Along with the *Magnesias*, *Mandragora*, *Phosphorus* and *Conium maculatum*,

Viscum is one of the leading vertigo remedies. Its symptoms are worse at night. It has a distinctive organ affinity in neurovegetative disturbances particularly relating to the circulatory and respiratory systems. It should be thought of first in spastic cough with dyspnea and irritation, bronchial asthma, angina pectoris, coronary conditions, cardiac neurosis, cardiac disturbances of emotional origin such as paroxysmal tachycardia and possibly any other functional or organic interference with cardiac innervation.<sup>8</sup>

### Meditation and Dream Proving

Madeline Evans published a meditative proving in 2000. Some of her insights are very similar to the previously mentioned findings by Twentymen in cures with Iscador, in that it helps the patient reclaim his/her suppressed inner life. She finds the remedy helpful for:

People who are viewed by their parents as still being children. People who can't break free from their parents. The potential held back by parental influence. Too dependent, don't stand up for themselves.<sup>9</sup>  
Those whose sensitivity has been damaged and awareness has been stultified.<sup>9</sup>

### 2012 Dream Proving

In April 2012, Alize Timmerman and I conducted a short dream proving of *Viscum album* at the Hahnemann Institute. The dream proving showed many dreams of going very deep underground and into fantastic places. Dreamers felt that there was some important reason to take this underground journey, even though there was resistance to doing it. Several dreamers saw that in this underground place, there were children who were doing dangerous things.

One woman had a dream that there was a party-taking place in a tree. There was a vulture sitting above the entrance to the party. This vulture was young and not intimidating. She associated it to her experience of witnessing a sky burial in Tibet.

In many of the dreams, there was a feeling of great danger, and the possibility of death.

The general themes of the dream proving include journeying underground, death and danger.

The symbolism in the last dream was unusual because there is a party-taking place in a tree and a sky burial. This dream shows the paradox of mistletoe, which grows on a tree, rather than in the earth. Parties are usually not held in trees. The sky burial is a ritual that exists in Tibet, whereas in most of the world bodies are buried in the earth, not in the sky. And then, there was the vulture, which in many cultures symbolises the great mother.

As we delve more deeply into the symbolic realm of mistletoe in Part II (next issue of LINKS), we shall see that the symbolism within these dreams give us many clues to its essence.

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