Hildegard of Bingen's Holistic Approach to Wellness

A 12th Century Healer and Visionary who Used Aromatic Extracts and More to Promote a Healthy Holistic Lifestyle

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The material in this book is a guide to the practice of aromatherapy. It is not a replacement for traditional health care, medical diagnosis, or medical treatment for illness. Refer to a licensed medical practitioner for medical care.

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Introduction

For the past twenty years I have been teaching about this wonderful woman—Hildegard of Bingen—in all of my classes, both in the Healing Touch Spiritual Ministry program and in the certification in clinical aromatherapy program. Why? Because I find that she not only has a great deal of wisdom to share with the world today, but because she speaks to me in my dreams and my waking moments. I’m sure I am not alone in that experience. There are several German doctors who have studied her for decades and who practice her medicine today in southern Germany. They literally are in love with her! I believe she has the attention of hundreds, if not thousands, of people around the world.

Hildegard was outspoken and headstrong and I like that about her. She didn’t let the rules of society nor the rules of the church stop her when her “voices” and her “visions” told her otherwise. She courageously stood her ground in the face of evil and disregard for human suffering. She didn’t believe what the church said—that sickness was a punishment from God for sin. On the contrary, she merely felt that sickness and illnesses were physical and spiritual trials and that we ought to help in any way we can to relieve pain and suffering. Granted, some of her remedies seem a bit quaint today but if you delve deeper into her philosophy of healing, you will see great wisdom through her suggested medicines and healing instructions.

In this short ebook, I want to identify seven ways I believe she is speaking to us today regarding how we can practice holistic self care. We owe it to ourselves in this short life span to live well, and by that I mean balanced, harmonious lives filled with love and joy.

Linda Smith
Devoted daughter of Hildegard
Chapter 1

Hildegard’s Life Journey

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098, nearly a thousand years ago yet her words speak to us today as if they were only just now written. Long before terms like “holism”, “holistic”, and treating the “whole person” became popular, this phenomenal woman was teaching others how to bring balance and moderation into their lives, focusing on body, mind, and spirit. I first became enamored with Hildegard in the early 90’s and began researching this woman who has the tenacity to stand up to both church and state, who relied on natural medicines of the earth, and who suffered from what we believe were migraine headaches her whole life. Through the reach of time, I felt that she was calling out to me to take courage, speak my truth, and heal my body and spirit naturally.

As fate would have it, I had an opportunity to teach energy healing in the Netherlands and was able to make connections to go to Hildegard’s present abbey as well as to the ruins of the abbey at Disibodenberg where she was brought as an eight year old and given to the church as her parent’s tithe. It was customary to give a tenth of everything to the church, even your children along with a substantial dowry to sustain that child throughout her lifetime. She was given into the care of Jutta Spanheim, an anchoress (holy woman) who had a small room attached to the outside wall of the abbey church. There, Hildegard learned to pray the prayers of the church, listen to the monks sing, to read, and write. Jutta was a bit taken aback when she discovered that this child “heard voices” and had “visions.” Now, this was the beginning of the burning times and hearing voices and seeing “lights” was not something you ever wanted to let anyone know about. She took her concerns to the abbot who, not wanting to lose such a great dowry, just told her to teach the child to

I am standing in the very place where 3 tiny rooms had been excavated where Hildegard spent the better part of her life. (1996)
write down what she “heard” from these voices. As it turned out, Hildegard many years later was able to reveal that her “voices” had dictated volumes of theology, philosophy, natural medicine, anatomy and physiology, and the causes and cures for disease. Some of her early work was given to a very influential monk at that time, Bernard of Clairvaux (who later was named a saint of the church) for inspection. Upon reading it, he gave it to the pope and asked that she receive a blessing thus advancing her work and status as an abbess. In essence this meant—no one could touch this woman. She soon became known as the “Sybil of the Rhine” [meaning seer] protected by both church and the emperor.

When Hildegard was 38 years old, Jutta died and Hildegard was elected by the nuns to be their magistra—teacher, leader and spokesperson to the abbot. At this time in history, no woman could head an abbey—even the female abbeys had to have a priest in charge. It did not take very long before Hildegard became a thorn in the abbot’s side. She requested numerous times for larger quarters for the nuns and finally to move out completely to a new location. Each time, her requests were denied. Hildegard had become quite popular in the eyes of the people so the abbot did not want to lose this source of income for his abbey.

The grounds of the abbey at Disibodenberg covered several acres. There would have been an external wall all around the compound to keep out bandits and thieves. Inside, there was an external courtyard with large gates that would have been open during the daylight hours for people to come and go for commerce. There would have been the abbey church itself, out buildings, and a large cloister for the monks, but the nuns were housed in cramped rooms attached to the abbey church. Pilgrims were welcome to get within the walls of any abbey before nightfall for safety reasons. But if any in their company fell sick, they could stay in the “hospice” which was a place of hospitality within the abbey grounds. Several of the external walls of the hospice still stand today, although the abbey church and the monk’s cloister are long gone. The hospice was a three story building with one floor beneath ground

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level where all the food stuff, herbs, tinctured beers, wines, brandies, salves and ointment were stored.

Hildegard would take her nuns over to the hospice daily to tend to the sick. This is an important point and tells us how devoted she was in living out the Benedictine rule to care for the sick. It probably should be pointed out that a church council declared in 1130 that members of religious orders were prohibited from practicing medicine or even studying it, stating that it was incompatible with the spirit of monastic life which implied withdrawal from the world. This marked the beginning of the transformation of monastic medicine into a scientific discipline taught in universities.

Even though Hildegard was diagnosing and prescribing medicinals for various physical and psychological problems, she was careful to interpret this as rendering “mercy” and “compassion” and following the rule of St. Benedict that prescribed care of the sick. Regardless how she managed to get around the church’s edict, her fame as a healer spread all over Europe which drew the sick to her doorstep as well as monks and nuns from other abbeys who came to learn from Hildegard. Pilgrims, of course, would be leaving alms which pleased the abbot and contributed to the coffers of the abbey.

The State of Medicine in the 12th Century

I think it is important to pause and take a glimpse of the state of medicine at the time of Hildegard to put her messages to us into perspective. If you were of the noble class of people, you generally had your own live-in physician who cared for you and your family members. But if you were among the peasants, the only persons you could rely upon were the “wise women” or midwives in the villages.
With the growing superstitions about witchcraft, much of this healing went underground and you needed to know whom you could seek out in secret. But then there were the monasteries and abbeys where you knew you could go to for healing potions and herbs, as well as for mercy and compassion.

Medicine was a combination of existing ideas from antiquity, spiritual influences, and shamanism. Standard medical knowledge was based chiefly upon surviving Greek and Roman texts which were preserved in the monasteries. Their worldview of the causes of illness was generally bound up with factors such as destiny, sin, and astral influences. As Christianity grew in influence, there was a natural tension between church and folk medicine which was in the realm of the magical or mystical with spells and incantations.

The church taught that God sent illnesses as a punishment and that repentance was necessary for recovery. This of course led to the practice of pilgrimage as a means of curing illness which brought many pilgrims to the gates of the abbeys where they could receive healing from the monks or nuns. Hildegard taught that illnesses were not punishment from God but rather were trials. She concentrated on wholeness. She believed that salvation, health, and healing in the earthly realm or the kingdom of the world were absolutely inseparable from salvation, health, and healing in the divine realm or the kingdom of Christ.

Medical theory dealt with logic, physics, and ethics; medical practice with dietetics, pharmacy, and surgery. When the church ruled that monks and nuns could not practice medicine, what that meant was they could no longer practice pharmacology and surgery. Medicine relied on natural science, pathology, and health. Pharmacology (including “poisons” as well as “medicines”) took precedence over surgery, which was always a last resort after pharmaceutics. Both, however, ranked after medical advice which would have been dietetics, the basis for all medical treatment. What most historians gloss over is that this was the beginning of guilds in the Middle Ages. Physicians formed guilds that
protected their craft and guilds all paid dues to the church and, therefore, were supported and protected by the church. Hildegard becoming known as a “healer” all over Europe could have been perceived as a threat by these physician guilds.

There are no great doctors of this period in the annals of medicine. But this period has something very valuable to teach us that is missing from modern therapy in spite of all its achievements—an image of the healthy and the sick human being, practical ways to healthy living, an art of human healing, and a way to restore human wholeness.

**Hildegard the Seer and Prophet**

In 2012, Hildegard was declared not only a saint of the church but a doctor of the church as well, a distinction held by only 4 women in history. The others are Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, and Therese of Lisieux. This designation recognizes Hildegard as a mover and a shaker, a force to be dealt with not only in her day but also in ours.

Hildegard in her writings calls for a marriage of science and spirituality—something that is both dangerous to those who want it forever separated, and a danger to the present status quo. She says we should employ our intellects which are “our greatest treasure,” as well as our mystical intuition. It is time to revive wisdom and awaken our “greening power” leading to honoring Mother Earth. Patriarchal excess in the form of fundamentalism across all cultural and spiritual lines is doing its best to stamp out the Divine Feminine and to put women in “their place.” The earth today is viewed as an object—something to be used up and we are blind to earth changes that will eventually harm us all in the end. Hildegard was as much a herald in her day as she is for us in our day. She speaks for the Divine Feminine and points the way to an alternative to the fundamentalism that rages today as it did in her time almost a thousand years ago. And, she was a voice for women at a time when such an approach equaled heresy.
A theme that runs through her writings is “wake up.” The Buddha means “the awakened one” and he invites everyone to be a “light unto yourself.” Jesus said “the kingdom of God is among you,” which implies we had better wake up. Hildegard taught that we are all born in “original wisdom.” Her art and her writings speak of this as a journey that isn’t easy. As prophet, she railed against not only kings and emperors who were bent on getting rich off the backs of the people but she also took issue with the direction of the church and with those who she saw as silent in the face of corruption and evil. One might ask did the Vatican really understand what they were doing when they named her a “doctor of the church?!“ Did they not know there would be a renaissance of interest in what she had to say?

Hildegard the Visionary

In 1141, Hildegard fell ill and depressed. The abbot would not let Hildegard and the nuns leave to form their own monastery; and her “voices” were pressing her to write down what they were saying—only she was refusing out of a sense of humility. She finally gave in and began to dictate to her secretary the visions she saw with “eyes wide open.” The result was she regained her health and wrote her first book Scivias, (Know the Ways) which took her ten years to write and which includes many paintings and ends with an opera—a first ever morality play. Her second major work, Liber vitae meritorum (Book of the Rewards of Life), focuses on morality and psychology, vices, and virtues to overcome them. This one only took five years to write. Her third visionary book later in life, Liber divinorum operum (Book of Divine Works) was written over seven years. In it she presents ten visions devoted to creation and salvation.

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Only nine years after she began writing, she fell desperately ill once again. She miraculously recovered when the abbot relented and let her go to found her own abbey at Rupertsberg a full day’s journey away. What made this abbey so different than others was that it was a woman—Hildegard herself who drew up the plans for its construction which included running water and indoor plumbing—unheard of in those days. Only about twenty of the nuns went with her which was a heartache for Hildegard that some of her most treasured friends refused to follow her. Through the move she was able to achieve financial independence and became the first woman to ever head an abbey without a male counterpart in charge. Fifteen years later when there was no more room in her abbey for those who wanted to join her, she founded a second abbey across the Rhine river at Ebingen. Twice a week, she would take an oxcart down the steep hill, a ferry across the Rhine, and then an oxcart to the second abbey in the town. Thus, she administered both abbeys until her death at age 81.

**Where are her abbeys today?** The abbey at Rupertsberg was destroyed in the hundred year’s war in the 1600’s. The nuns were able to flee to their sister community at Ebingen. That abbey was pulled down by Napoleon in 1802 and the nuns fled and were dispersed; the community was eventually dissolved and the land taken over by the state. That is why the relics (bones) of Hildegard reside in the parish church in the town of Ebingen and not in her abbey. A new abbey was built a hundred years later up...
on a hill overlooking the town of Ebingen and continues to carry on Hildegard’s tradition. As for the ruins at Rupertsberg, someone a few centuries ago bought the land and quarried the stone, removing everything. There isn’t even a marker as to where the abbey once stood. Not a stone was left on a stone.

One significant event stands out in her elder years. A poor soldier of fortune fell mortally wounded at the doorstep of Hildegard’s abbey. The nuns tried to revive him but there was little breath left in him. With no time to send for the village priest for this young man to confess his sins, they sent for Mother Hildegard. The young man promptly confessed his wayward life to her and died. As far as Hildegard was concerned, this young man was in the hands of God and so they buried him in the churchyard. When the Archbishop heard about this, he wrote her a letter demanding that this infidel’s bones be cast out of consecrated ground. In the dead of night, this eighty year old nun was out in the abbey cemetery erasing any sign of where this young man had been buried. The Archbishop was incensed at her insubordination and threw Hildegard and her entire abbey out of the church! It was called an “interdict” and this prevented the nuns from singing the prayers of the church or receiving the sacraments. This was a matter of public shame for her abbey. Hildegard fired off letters to the Archbishop, the cardinals and to the pope himself declaring that if this interdict was not lifted, they would all find themselves consigned to a place of no-music, where Satan himself resided! (I take that to mean, HELL!) It took nearly a year, but the interdict was finally lifted and Hildegard exhausted by this struggle, died.
shortly thereafter. Some speculate that this is why it took the church a thousand years to recognize the one the people at that age had already declared “a living saint.”

Hildegard the Healer

It is to Hildegard’s other writings on healing that I want to focus on in this short eBook. Between 1150 and 1160 she composed her writings on natural science and medicine which are really compilations of folk experience, ancient traditions, and Benedictine practice. Her original work did not survive, but in the 13th century copies of some of the portions of this writing were divided into two books:

*Causae et cure (Causes and Cures also called Holistic Healing in some English translations)* unites the cosmology and pathology of the humors of classical antiquity with the Christian teaching on creation and redemption. It is clear that she believes that a person’s health depended on the balance of these four basic fluids or humors of blood, yellow bile, phlegm, and black bile. *Causes and Cures* deals with the creation of the world and the structure of the universe; studies the healthy and diseased human body and its development, sexual activity, the principal illnesses from head to toe, nourishment, digestion, and metabolic imbalances, mental illnesses, various kinds of medicine and treatment; and it offers prescriptions for a healthy lifestyle. It catalogs forty-seven diseases according to causes, symptoms, and treatments. Hildegard lists more than 300 plants here, emphasizing medical and physiological theory as well as herbal treatments.

*Physica* is an encyclopedic account of biology and physiology and of healing intended for general use. It contains nine books that draw upon elements of nature, including precious gemstones, crystals, metals, plants, trees, fish, birds, and more, for cures to ailments. The longest and most comprehensive section contains information concerning the medicinal uses and harvesting of more than 230 herbs and other plants for herbal remedies, love potions and lust quenchers. The medical and physiological theories behind the use of plants in *Physica* are assumed—she simply doesn’t spell it out for us. She usually goes on though to indicate what medicinal purposes the various plants serve.
As for her sources, we really don’t know but it is likely that she used medieval herbals and older texts by Pliny, Galen, St. Isidore of Seville, and others adding in folklore, and her own experiences as an herbalist. Her monastery at Rupertsberg had a very large herbal garden from which medicines were prepared to treat members of her order as well as the people from the surrounding countryside. Nowhere does she attribute her knowledge of these matters to any kind of revelation or vision. However, in her last book on theology, she does give us a hint when she says, “Everywhere in creation (trees, plants, animals, and precious stones) there are mysterious healing forces, which no person can know unless they have been revealed by God.” Recent scholars compare her writings about the human body, disease, and medicines with what was known knowledge in the 12th century about these subjects and cannot help but conclude that her writings were the product of supernatural inspiration. Medical knowledge in that age was jealously guarded in universities and women were excluded from these studies. Much to the consternation of many biologists and taxonomists today, Hildegard makes little attempt to describe the plants for purposes of identification so the practicality of her writing is limited since often we aren’t quite sure what plant she was referring to. Plus she will slip from writing in Latin to using common German names which is all the more confusing for twenty-first century eyes and ears.

I find it curious why some researchers question whether Hildegard personally attended, treated, and healed the sick. Even a cursory reading of her descriptions of illnesses and what remedies to employ convince me that indeed she did personally care for the sick and infirm and worked to alleviate physical and spiritual sufferings of all who sought her help. She offered advice, dealt with a whole range of health issues in her letters and books, and she also suffered from various ailments including blinding auras from migraine headaches and several bouts of paralysis. She sought to fulfill the Benedictine rule to care for the

Hildegard expressed some of her visions in mandalas. This one depicts a celebration of creation with 9 concentric circles of angels. She writes that “all of creation is a symphony of joy and jubilation.”

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sick and even brought men into the cloister to care for their needs and restore their health. She interpreted Benedict’s motto of ora et labora (prayer and purposeful action—work) to mean pray and fortify the sick, restoring them to wholeness.

For Hildegard, all the precious herbs and powders and the spices and aromatic extracts from rare plants have to be used with discretion and understanding. She used beneficial drinks and medicinal wines; surgery at that time was restricted to first aid, to cupping and to bleeding, which was used as a regular means of thinning the blood or for specific illnesses. The person weakened by bloodletting was prescribed additional foods and drinks to restore them to health.

Hildegard bases her “healing art” on what she emphasizes as the special position of humanity in the cosmos and the human orientation to wholeness and redemption. During this creative time in her life, she wasn’t living a life withdrawn in a monastery concentrating only on her garden. She was extraordinarily active and outward going in her correspondence and in her public appearances. Her medicine was really in line with ayurvedic medicine, Western herbalism, and Chinese medicine.

In Allensbach Southern Germany, there is a Hildegard Center today that practices Hildegard’s teaching about healing and is based on her belief that all illness stems from a single cause rather than an array of different ones. (This sounds like our modern-day alternative healthcare beliefs.) It is run by Dr. Wighard Strehlow, a former chemist, who is now a medical practitioner and Hildegard researcher. Strehlow originally studied with Gottfried Hertzka, the doctor credited with reviving modern interest in Hildegard’s medicine. These two German doctors have constructed an entire pseudo-scientific curative theory based on Hildegard’s teachings with treatments at their clinics that include saunas, herbal remedies, syrups, salves, powders, teas, diet, fasting, bloodletting, and other treatments. Between these two clinics, thousands of patients have been treated from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland who come to them with a range of ailments, including AIDS, heart disease,
morning sickness, cancer, and autoimmune disorders. They argue that Hildegard’s account of cancer, including the pre-cancerous stages of the disease, is wholly in keeping with modern scientific knowledge. Interestingly, they do draw the line at her advocacy of whale meat but do list those references in a footnote. Hildegard’s theories and therapies do have such a close affinity with homeopaths and others outside conventional medicine today. No wonder her writings are receiving such a resurgence of interest. She would have been appalled at our dependence on chemicals (pharmaceuticals) rather than nature.

Many years ago on one of my teaching trips to Europe, I went to Waterloo in Belgium where Napoleon was defeated. I wanted to see the ruins of the Cistercian abbey founded in 1146 at Villers which was destroyed by Napoleon. (Incidentally, the monks at Villars wrote to Hildegard with lots of questions that she didn’t always answer because there were so many.) Across the street was a very old stone building—a museum which was having an herbal display. Curious, I went in to discover practically every herb or vile of essential oil extract in the display cited Hildegard as a resource. I then discovered that her medicine is still taught in Europe to this very day. In fact there is now at the heart of the Villers abbey, an herbal garden inspired by the works of Hildegard with more than 70 plants being cultivated.

Hildegard’s Philosophy of Medicine

Generally speaking, Hildegard’s healing philosophy is concerned not so much with treatments as the importance of putting things right—as in restoring people to a sensible and healthy way of life. So she concerns herself not so much with “cures” but with the curative powers of language, music, and relating personally to the sick individual. She is not in favor of just “offering a medicinal remedy if you don’t add the tonic of your own virtue.” This comment was directed at physicians who she saw as just “mixing up medicines.”
All illnesses she believed had a corresponding cure or answer. According to her, not cancer, but migraine and asthma are the most incurable illnesses. Cure meant removing the very roots and not just the suppression of some symptoms. Detoxifying and renouncing certain poisons like intoxicating drink (wine was not included in this), certain foods and coffee, having a good and trusting relationship with the doctor, enjoying life, taking care of your body, believing in God, the Creator and Lord of the natural order of things—these were expressions of her philosophy on healing.

Sickness according to Hildegard and other healers of her day was not merely a process but inadequacy and failure of intended purpose. Creative effort she felt was only possible when the person is in a state of health. That meant drawing upon the force of nature that she called “viriditas” translated as greenness or juiciness. Her healing art combines practical therapy and the Christian spirit of mercy or compassion. In her eyes, the proper attitude for a medical doctor or healer was not in finding a cure at any cost but showing the compassion that any human being ought to show to one another—behaving like the Good Samaritan. Only in this way can the sick person be acknowledged for who he or she really is. This makes me wonder if Hildegard wasn’t speaking out of her own need since she was often sick and in need of healing. She states, “I am a poor creature lacking health, force, strength, and education,” for I am “a mere shadow of vitality and health.” This is where she relied upon Christ the healer, Christ the physician.
Viriditas—Greenness

Here is a woman in the 12th century talking about “life-force” which we today are all too familiar with as an Eastern concept. She calls it viriditas (her own made-up word) for greenness, juiciness or moistness. What is it? Hildegard says it is God’s freshness that we receive as spiritual and physical life-forces. This is vivid imagery that probably came to her simply as she looked around the countryside. The Rhine valley is lush and green and as we know today, a wonderful place, flourishing in fruit and vineyards. This greening power mysteriously is inherent in animals and fishes and birds, in all plants and flowers and trees, in all the beautiful things of this world. Human flesh is green she says and our blood possesses this special greening power. The “life force of the body” (the soul) was green. Whenever sex was involved—she said there was a particular brightness in the green. This greening power was at the heart of salvation and the reality of the Word was verdant life.

This greenness connects us all together as humanity and shines forth giving us common purpose. It is the strength within us that manifests as a strong and healthy life. This greenness originates in the four elements: earth and fire, water and air. It is sustained by the four qualities: by dry and moist, by cold and hot; not only the body—but greenness of soul as well.

Hildegard contrasts greening power or wetness with the sin of drying up (one of her visions.) A dried-up person or a dried-up culture loses the ability to create. Hildegard saw this as a grave sin and a tragedy. It also describes how she felt about herself during those years when she was refusing to write down her visions and voices. Her awakening did not occur until she embraced her own viriditas. From then on Hildegard was constantly creating.

Hildegard gives an interesting image about greenness stating that it drenches all things in this world and then gives the tree as an example. The function of the tree’s
Hildegard’s philosophy of healing centered around her view of the body-soul relationship. She identified 35 vices and 35 virtues to offset the vices (see Appendix for a complete list). The vices are like risk factors that can destroy humanity and life on earth while the virtues are healing forces counteracting this possible catastrophe. A virtue like love, compassion, trust, or hope positively

In this illumination, Hildegard is depicting five virtues building a heavenly city in the house of wisdom. They are Constancy in the center, to her right is Heavenly Desire, to the left is Compunction of the Heart, lower right with wings is Harmony and Peace and to the left in the circle is the flexible compassion of God.
affects wound healing, lowers blood pressure by decreasing the adrenaline blood level, calms the heart rate, and decreases life-threatening abnormalities like poor digestion and migraine. According to Hildegard’s writings, these Christian virtues are the greatest healing powers when negative forces—depression, madness, anxiety, fear, rage, bitterness, arrogance, desperation—are blocking the healing light (energy). Negative thoughts, emotions, and feeling are health destroying. Strehlow lists these vices and virtues in an easy format for us—they can be used as a practical guide for meditation, fasting, and prayer. Hildegard even wrote a morality play—and presented it as an opera with her nuns taking the parts of the virtues and her monk secretary Volmar, playing the part of the devil.

Strehlow asks why are there so many illnesses considered incurable today when Hildegard only considered two diseases to be incurable—migraine and asthma? Medical practice as we know it in the West treats disease on the organic level—neglecting to look at the psychosomatic [emotional] causes. He observes that diseases are a malfunction of the body and neither drugs nor surgery, nor radiation can restore the body’s deficiencies. We know that it is impossible to solve an emotional problem with concrete remedies. Not even cancer can escape the problems of a disturbed soul. It will just keep coming back until the negative psychic factors that
caused the illness in the first place are eliminated. According to Hildegard, behind every negative force stands a positive spiritual healing force, and each weakness can be balanced by a spiritual strength.

Some interesting observations have been made about Hildegard’s beliefs about the head and the spine. We know that the skull and vertebrae hold the nervous system together and provide the location for nerve outlets. These nerves follow the body segments to activate and stimulate the entire body and all its organs. According to anatomy—there are 34 vertebrae plus the skull makes 35. These vertebrae with their thirty-five spinal nerves communicate with the thirty-five virtues and vices in our soul. Strehlow says that this discovery of the soul-nerve interplay in Hildegard’s psychotherapy is one of the most important findings in the field and enables us to detect the underlying risk factors for the soul-causing sicknesses. What we call the autonomic nervous system was for Hildegard the language between the body and the soul. Hildegard revealed a thousand years ago that lifestyle affects this communication. Negative feelings like hate, anger, and fear as well as positive emotions like love, compassion, hope and joy exert a strong influence on the autonomic nervous system, causing either health or disease. Hildegard already knew this—she observed that health and well-being of our bodies depends entirely on the energy status of our souls. In order to heal the body—we have to heal the soul. Healing of the soul requires activating the power of the divine energy represented by the thirty-five virtues, or healing forces.

All of the virtues are uplifting and energizing and lead us into an atmosphere of relaxation, peace, and healing. The corresponding vices are life-destroying, bringing low energy, fatigue, and a loss of immune strength. Fasting (which I will address in the next chapter) is the universal remedy for twenty-eight of these spiritual problems (vices). The other seven require spiritual healing exercises like prayer, living in isolation, and physical training.

**Hildegard’s Infirmary at Rupertsberg**

We can only speculate what Hildegard’s infirmary actually looked like. Years ago
when I visited the ruins at Villers, I was impressed with the size of that infirmary (the walls are still standing in this area of the ruins). It had large windows that would have been shuttered except on warm days; and on sunny days, the sick would have been carried out into the herbal gardens right outside the windows so that the fragrance from the herbs could help them.

The infirmary was a place to recover for the sick members of the community (this was not the hospice where pilgrims who were ill were housed). The infirmary would have been outfitted with beds, tubs for medicinal baths, a medicine cupboard, probably a fire place for preparation of food for the sick, mortars for grinding drugs, bowls, wooden spatulas, bandages, and phlebotomes, or lancets for bloodletting. Most likely they would have kept books in the infirmary intended for the support of the spiritual life for the patients. The infirmary would have had its own chapel or it would be located near the abbey church for the nuns to maintain some sort of community participation. There would have also been medical texts or instructions and one of the members of the community would preside over the whole infirmary with probably a few assistants that could have been novices or lay assistants from the village to help with nursing care. So even though we don’t have an exact description of Hildegard’s infirmary, this is generally what all Benedictine cloisters would have been like. Because of the rules of the church, trained physicians in monastic communities would have been the exception.

Little is actually known about the details of health care at Rupertsberg and at Ezingen. It does seem likely that Hildegard’s abbeys shared with other monasteries that have two sets of related medical literature—books and treatises kept in their library or cloister and shorter, more practical extracts of these same works, mainly the recipes kept in the infirmary.

What happened to her medical teachings after her death? Primarily they were hidden away except for some copies that had already been circulated. However,
in the 14th and 15th centuries Hildegard’s *Physica* found an audience among several very different groups. Parts of Hildegard’s *Physica* found its way into the *Cookbook of Master Eberhard* and into his Medical Book that accompanied it. Other sections found their way into the writings of several university trained professors of medicine. Two rectors at the Heidelberg University took short extracts from *Causes and Cures* and included it in their own writings. So what we see is that her medical writings were adapted by later copyists to their own purposes so that today we aren’t sure what was the original text and what has been edited in by others. Hildegardian scholars believe that her medical texts were unfinished in her life time—a sort of work-in-progress. They never existed in a finished format which made it easy for many people to have copies of sections or chapters of her medical texts.
Chapter 2

Living a Healed and Whole (Holistic) Life

Our health and well-being of our bodies depends entirely on the energy status of our souls, writes Hildegard. In order to heal the body—we have to consider the health of both body and soul. How does she suggest we heal our souls? By activating the power of the divine energy in the 35 virtues or healing forces. She’s basically saying that you cannot just look at a physical problem without seeing the connection with the emotional and spiritual issues that contributed to the physical one.

The plants Hildegard used were generally those which she might have collected from the nearby woods and fields or grown in the monastery garden. She does use some more exotic ingredients, like ginger, pepper, frankincense, and sugar that would have been bought. The most important fact for Hildegard is whether a plant is considered “hot” or “cold” which follows ancient Greek thought. Every herb was either warm or cold. The warmth of herbs signifies the soul and the cold of herbs signifies the body. Certain herbs have the virtue of very strong aromas, others the harshness of the most pungent aromas. They can curb many evils, since evil spirits do not like them. [This actually was a very common belief and can be explained through vibrational frequencies. Plants carry a certain vibrational frequency whereas evil spirits manifest as a low frequency. Hence living plants can drive out evil spirits.]

We see in this cosmic wheel, humans cultivating the earth through the seasons of the year and the seasons of their lives. The tree stands for inexhaustible life. Hildegard celebrates in this vision the fertility of the earth. “I saw how moisture from the gentle layer of air flowed over the earth. This air revived the earth’s greening power and caused all fruits to put forth seeds and become fertile... From the gentle layer of air, moisture effervesces over the earth. This awakens the earth’s greenness and causes all fruits to appear through germination.” You can see from this why staying wet and moist are such important virtues to Hildegard—without the moisture there is no creativity, no fertility.
Hildegard offers concrete, exact directions for gathering, processing, storing, and using medicinal herbs. She tells you where these herbs grow and the proper time of day and season to gather them. She shows how to prepare these herbs as soups, beverages, purgatives, little cakes, powders and salves; and she describes how to use them as poultices, compresses, applications, and inhalants. For Hildegard, life from God was transmitted into the plants, animals, and precious gems. People in turn ate the plants and animals and acquired some of the gems—thereby obtaining *viriditas*. People then gave out *viriditas* through the virtues.

According to Hildegard, human beings were originally created to be healthy and whole. These are basic characteristics to which we are entitled. In her theology, after the fall, man and woman discovered that everything had to be carefully and expertly cultivated. Life needed to be ordered with a fixed set of rules in everyday life—part of a sensible lifestyle, she writes. For Hildegard, discretion (which includes the capacity of discrimination) is the mother of all the virtues, which can help you maintain the balance necessary for a healthy lifestyle. When balance is missing, illness and disease take over. She realized that healing and holiness are involved in planning even the most mundane and practical aspects of everyday living.

This is what I love about Hildegard’s take on life: all things in moderation (discretion). This is the vital juice, as it were, the very breath of all training and education. She observes that discretion touches on a vast range of thoughts and actions. She advises to guard your *viriditas* with the utmost care through proper diet, proper lifestyle, that is one free from excess indulgences and cravings, and attention to spiritual matters. This is a very natural health regime that is very practical and it’s one based on classic Benedictine principle of moderation in life.

Lifestyle should be sustained and supported by our choices in nutrition, food and drink, even our clothing and the houses we live in. Everything should be a reflection of God. But as I look at our lifestyles today I see that 80 percent of the population suffers and dies because of a stressful lifestyle and harmful nutrition. Only 10 percent of our illnesses are caused by environment or genes. We
have let technology manipulate our food, water, clothing, and our houses. We have sick house and sick building syndromes, food allergies, chemicals in everything we touch and smell. I wonder what Hildegard would have to say to us today about our lifestyle choices.

From her work, I want to focus on seven ways we can incorporate Hildegard’s wisdom into our everyday practices for balance and health—for a healthy lifestyle choice. Yes we know she had lots of remedies that included herbs and plant extracts that she mixed into potions, lotions, tinctures, powders, and teas and she used various remedies in saunas and baths. I will refer to some of her recipes as I talk about these seven ways to build your health and improve your immunity and find balance according to this medieval wisdom.

1. Nutrition

Moderation according to Hildegard meant that nutrition needed to take into consideration the seasons and the divisions of the day, a person’s chronological age, capacity for work, their abilities, and of course individual attitudes and personality traits as well as mood. She recommends regular meals in appropriate communal settings and of course balancing one’s diet. She was not a vegetarian but only rarely recommended chicken or red meat except for those who were ill. The diet for the nuns included lots of green vegetables they could grow in their gardens, grains, especially spelt which Hildegard thought was an exquisitely perfect food, and fish. Both of her abbeys were

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**Notes for the Aromatherapists**

Throughout Hildegard’s writings we find dietary recommendations where she was clearly extracting the life-blood of the plant, the essential oil, (usually through boiling) and then using it in a recipe to address some physical and/or emotional problem. Here are just a few samples of some of her remedies:

Pulverized ginger soaked in wine for clearing up eyesight. For constipation, make a paste with the pulverized ginger mixed with flour and eat warmed. For pains in the stomach, drink ginger in wine.

Ginger essential oil can be used in similar ways for gastrointestinal discomfort. It can be used for chills, colds, colic, congestion, coughs, cramps, digestive disorders, fevers, flu, impotence, indigestion, memory, motion sickness, muscular aches and pains.

To calm any bitterness of heart and mind and bring joy, take some nutmeg, an equal weight of cinnamon and a little clove. Grind these to a powder, add a similar amount of whole wheat flour and a little water to make a paste. Then eat it often.

Nutmeg essential oil is used for digestive and kidney problems. It may also be helpful for supporting the adrenals, helping arthritis, circulation, flatulence, gout, joints, muscles, fatigue, neuralgia.

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on the river, so fish was plentiful. Herbs were used for flavor and for nourishment, especially for those who were ailing in any way. As for other grains, she writes about wheat, rye, oats, barley with spelt as the best grain. Eating it “makes steadfast flesh and prepares strong blood. It makes a bright mind and brings joy to a person’s mind.” She thought you should eat spelt for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, even as spelt coffee. Some of the vegetables she writes about in her book on plants include peas, beans, and lentils. There are a few more named but we aren’t sure today what plant she was referring to.

Too much food, especially animal foods like meat, cheese, and eggs, makes one heavy and earthy. We know now that animal food produces acid by increasing uric acid but also melancholy (gallic acid). Melancholy is biochemically related to the steroid cholesterol, a precursor of the sex hormones. An excess of sex hormones causes cancers of the breast, colon, and prostate. Also, acid causes inflammation and autoagression (autoimmune disorders).

Hildegard also warned against overeating. She said, “don’t stress your body with overeating. Your stomach gets irritated when you eat too much or indulge in unhealthy foods. Your bladder can get inflamed if you drink unhealthy drinks. These will send acidic juices to the intestines and a bad smoke to your spleen, which will then swell and get sore. This will make your heart hurt, and a mucus will form around it. (Sounds like what we call heartburn!) Then she adds that you may lose your appetite, drop weight, and

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feel less energy. Sometimes people who have had this happen to them become depressed and grumpy.

To improve digestion, she recommended various mints but her favorite was spearmint. She said just as salt tempers all food when added to it moderately, if too much or too little is added it is bad. Similarly spearmint, added moderately to meats, fish, purees, or other sauces, brings a good taste to the food and is a good condiment. And when it is eaten thus, she says it warms the stomach and brings good digestion. As for over-eating, she recommended water mint either raw or cooked with meat, or in a broth or cooked as a sauce. The stuffiness will disappear because the water mint cools the fatty and warm intestines. She also notes that if a person has a sick lung producing lots of phlegm, difficulty breathing, and coughing, they should drink the water mint often.

2. Fasting and Detoxing

Fasting for Hildegard was a useful tool for one’s health—both physical and spiritual. As for spiritual health, she found fasting a universal remedy for 28 of the 35 vices (spiritual problems) that she identifies in her books on theology. Hildegard recommended three different kinds of fasting methods: long-term fasting, bread fasting, and hard-core fasting. These are described in detail in the book *Hildegard of Bingen’s Spiritual Remedies* by Dr. Wighard Strehlow. Let me describe just one of them here—the long-term fasting.

Just as lilies clear the spirit, the smell of Lavender clears the eyes and is a potent antiseptic. Lavender can prevent viral infections and even strengthen the body during pre-cancer and cancer. And, it is good for getting rid of lice she says.

Lavender is a universal healing oil—good for physical, mental and spiritual discomforts. Good for burns, skin problems, alertness, allergies, anxiety, restfulness, sunburn, high blood pressure, indigestion, inflammation, insect repellent, itching, depression, blisters, hair loss, herpes simplex, measles, etc.

Peppermint and spearmint would have both been common herbs available for Hildegard.

Spearmint is used for digestive and respiratory conditions and is reported to balance and increase metabolism which may help burn up fats and other toxins in the body.

*Mentha aquatica* (water mint) grows in damp places and is native to much of Europe. It hybridizes with *Mentha spicata* (spearmint) to produce *Mentha x piperita* (peppermint). Mint is excellent for both the digestive and respiratory systems.

*Pellitory root (feverfew?) has a pungent efficacy in relieving toothache and promoting a free flow of saliva.*
Long term fasting is the easiest form of fasting with powerful foods for the mind based on spelt, fruits, and vegetables. For Hildegard, an abundance of food as medicine can heal both body and soul and sustain life. Dr. Strehlow says that for our modern life, this kind of diet can heal and prevent sicknesses like coronary heart disease, stroke, cancer, arteriosclerosis, and diabetes.

At the top of Hildegard’s list of good foods would of course be spelt, an ancient grain that contains everything we need—proteins, complex carbohydrates, unsaturated fats, and 45 minerals and trace minerals necessary to build and regenerate cartilage and bone. Spelt, according to Dr. Strehlow, contains an essential substance—thiocyanate which has fundamental effects on our health since it stimulates the red marrow in our bones to produce enough healthy blood and to make the cell membranes impenetrable to cancer-causing viruses. Spelt contains no stress-related, allergy-related proteins, as wheat does and it is better tolerated by the body than any other grain. Just make sure that the spelt you buy is organically grown, free of harmful pesticides, chemicals, food additives, and environmental pollutants. Also, don’t forget that spelt is a form of wheat and if you already have wheat sensitivities, I would not advise using it.

For this fasting, Hildegard says to eat spelt 3 times a day:

**Breakfast**—hot spelt cereal, cream of spelt, waffles, pancakes, spelt muffins, spelt bread, spelt coffee

**Lunch**—spelt soup, spelt sandwich, spelt sprinkled on salad, spelt burgers

**Dinner**—spelt rice, spelt pasta, vegetables, salad with spelt kernels, and fruit desserts

**Spices** include pellitory (some researchers believe this is the perennial herb feverfew that looks like chamomile*), galangal (related to ginger root only has a stronger taste and is more potent), thyme, cooked onion, raw garlic, parsley, nutmeg, salt, and pepper.

**Vegetables** should be cooked—fennel, chestnuts, beets, carrots, pumpkin, all kinds of beans including organic soybeans, celery, chickpeas in the form of falafel or hummus.
Oils could include sunflower, walnut, and almond oil for cooking and dressings.

Avoid strawberries, peaches, plums, and leeks, which cause bad blood, inflammations, and eczema as well as a weakening of the immune system.

Fasting was useful for Hildegard but she did not recommend going overboard with it. Her hard-core fasting should only be done for a week and then an additional regeneration week. When doing such a fast—you are detoxifying your body. She noted that sick people who have lost weight should not fast but instead should be regenerated. Also people with acute illnesses like epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, stroke, heart attack, ataxia, and convulsions are excluded from fasting.

Detoxification is necessary, Hildegard says, in order to be healed. He who thinks that nature gave men only remedies, and no poisons, is greatly in error, she adds. Strawberries, pork, and coffee are examples of what Hildegard identifies as nutritional poisons. But you can also be poisoned by the environment, and by mental poisons like stress, distress, and anger which change bile fluids, and thereby the chemistry of the blood. It is important to detoxify from these poisons.

A beneficial effect of doing a hard-core fast is the release of poisons and waste products from the body. Hildegard recommends doing a colon cleansing before starting such a fast. This does not necessarily mean colon hydrotherapy as we know it today; she suggested a purgative cookie made from a mixture of spices—ginger, sweet wood licorice, and euphorbia. Before eating this cookie, Hildegard says “warm yourself in front of a fire if it is cold outside, and afterward rest on your bed while remaining awake. Then walk slowly and do not let the cold overwhelm you. In this way the spices retain the good fluids, whereas the noxious ones will leave the body.”

You can also begin your fast without the purgative by administering an enema. Use 1 pint of fennel or chamomile tea water, hold it in, and release in 5 minutes. Repeat the same procedure with 2 pints and continue doing this daily before you go to bed. Enemas are essential during fasting, as toxic wastes would...
otherwise stay in the body and be reabsorbed into the blood. Fasting stimulates the building and growth of new cells, restoring health and rejuvenating the body. After the first few days, the body will nurture itself. During fasting a vast amount of toxins and wastes leave the body. Her Parsley-Honey wine can help normalize the body.

What about our modern day disease called “leaky-gut” syndrome? According to Hildegard, too much black bile causes the blood to become acidic and the whole body can become inflamed. We also know that the intestinal microflora suffer under the acidity and destroy the bacteria that usually protect the gut. Many other diseases are the result of autoaggression (diseases like heart attack, stroke, cancer, and arthritis) due to black bile. Hildegard traces the cause of autoagression—meaning we are killing ourselves (and I would add, autoimmune diseases here) to a chemical substance that she calls black bile, gallic acid, or in Latin Melancholia. This substance is released under stress from the liver and quickly discharged into the intestines, which becomes so acidic that the good bacteria die.

Autoagression/autoimmune and Black Bile

- Allergy, hay fever, eczema, acne, psoriasis, asthma
- Cancer
- Chronic fatigue syndrome
- Chronic inflammatory arthritis
- Fibromyalgia, scleroderma, lupus erythematosus
- Gastritis, colitis, Crohn’s disease, celiac disease, hepatitis, pancreatitis, nephritis
- Heart attack
- Migraine, depression, Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, multiple sclerosis
- Stroke

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Effective treatment of leaky-gut syndrome requires several steps in order to change lifestyle. Spiritual healing is necessary, and there are appropriate strategies to reverse the intestinal permeability and to neutralize black bile.

Historically, intestinal purgation was one of the most important healing procedures. Hildegard’s remedy Anthamanticum with pear honey is a powerful cleansing and healing mixture in the fight against intestinal pathogens, including candida. Dietary measures include spelt, vegetables, and fruits. (See next section on diet for melancholy). What else cleanses the system from toxic substances? By way of the skin—baths, saunas, and packs. Hildegard defines this kind of Turkish bath where dry rocks are heated producing steam for a sweat bath. She says this is not good for someone who is thin and parched, but helpful for a person who is fat who then overcomes and reduces humors that are present in excessive amounts in himself. She says this is also helpful for someone who is arthritic. In other comments, she recommends using juniper or balsam in saunas.

And then, there is bloodletting to thin the blood. For a healthy person, Hildegard says that only enough blood should be taken as a man might drink in one gulp but for a weakened person, only an amount about the size of an egg. Excessive bloodletting weakens the body. A properly measured bloodletting gets rid of noxious humors and heals the body just as moderate eating and drinking bring the body back to strength. How often? Hildegard says no more often than every 3 months and bloodletting is not necessary after the fiftieth year. As a nurse, I think of donating blood and the benefits to the body when you are “bled.” According to research, you can reduce your risk of heart disease and cancer, it has the effect of

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**Pear Honey**

8 pears, cored and seeded
35 grams bear fennel rhizome
28 grams little galangal rhizome
22 grams licorice rhizome
15 grams summer savory
8 tbs defoamed honey (put honey in a glass in a pan of boiling water, stir, and remove foam)

Cut the pears into small pieces and simmer enough water to cover until the pears are soft. Strain, then beat until you have a sauce. Mix the fennel, galangal, licorice, and summer savory to form a powder. Blend into the pear pulp. Add the honey and stir until the mixture is the consistency of jam. Spoon into a jar, cover, and refrigerate.

Take 1 tsp in the morning, 2 tsps at lunch, and 3 tsps before bedtime, either straight from the spoon or spread on a piece of bread.
reducing iron levels that can thicken blood and increase free-radical damage. And according to the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA), researchers found that participants ages 43-61 had fewer heart attacks and strokes when they donated blood every six months.

3. Sleep/Wake Balance

A carefully managed pattern of waking and sleeping requires special attention, Hildegard says, to overall planning of equilibrium in everyday life and must take account of the sequences and modalities of day and night in their cosmic setting. “Day may eclipse night, but night imparts wisdom.” It’s as if she thought that the sleep/wake cycle was part of God’s grand design, part of the yin/yang balance, work/leisure, quiet/singing, eating/fasting, rest/movement. Staying properly awake and vigilant keeps you healthy, she said, whereas too much or too little sleep makes you ill. Healing sleep also brings refreshing dreams. “When people wake up again in a state of proper equilibrium they are well-equipped to enter the day’s events with sharp wits, a fresh face, and a pleasant attitude. All their limbs and organs will be working together peacefully and happily.” From this we can gather that Hildegard recognized the debilitating effects of stress in one’s life and recommended moderation to lead a balanced life. Sufficient rest was one of her most recommended remedies for the relief of stress.

Hildegard in her visionary medicine writes about the 35th vice as being the worse of all—

Here are some of Hildegard’s recommendations on using tree bark and leaves for various health problems.

**Juniper**—cook it in water, strain through a cloth, then add honey and a bit of vinegar and licorice, and less ginger than licorice. Cook it again and put in a little bag and make a spiced wine. This will diminish pain in the chest, lungs, or liver when fasting. Also, take green twigs and cook them in water and make a sauna bath with that water. Bathe often in it and it diminishes various bad fevers in you.

Juniper oil is a detoxifier and a cleanser, helps with kidneys, liver, aching muscles, nerve function and rheumatism.

**Cypress.** Cook some wood of this tree in a moderate amount of wine and drink it often for stomachache. One who is ill or failing in his whole body should cook the branches in water and bathe in it often.

Cypress is good for arthritis, for lung problems, lymphatic congestion, menstrual pain. It strengthens blood capillary walls thus improving circulation.

**Fir**—cut up the branches and bark in little pieces, add half as much sage and boil, then add butter and make an ointment. Can rub on the head or the body for pain or congestion.

Balsam fir is good for muscular aches and lung problems.

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melancholy. I want to address it here because people caught in melancholy often have sleep pattern disturbances. What she means by melancholy is sadness, misery, fear, dejection, depression, and gloom. This person has forgotten the joy of heaven and instead desperately tries to find happiness within their harsh world. And so, all vitally dies in the depressed because the spirit of life has vanished. She points the finger at “black bile” which relates to the malfunction of the central nervous system and a lack in happy-making neurotransmitters—serotonins and endorphins. The path out of sadness leads to health. Her recommendations include the scent of roses or lilies, precious stones, and anti-melancholica, which neutralizes black bile and stabilizes the nerves. Her primary treatment? Spelt! She advises to start the day with a breakfast of cooked spelt cereal. Psyllium seeds are another excellent anti-melancholica to improve digestion. Pellitory is considered a panacea. By sprinkling some on your food or adding it while cooking, “reduces the harmful substances in the blood and increase the ‘good blood,’ pellitory produces a clear mind,” she says. Then she recommends nourishing the nerves. She has a recipe for nerve cookies to invigorate all 5 senses and prevent them from dulling with age. The effect is attributed to nutmeg, which is known for its psychotropic properties and its stimulating effect on the nerves.

Sweet almonds provide excellent nourishment for the nerves and can replenish the empty brain and promote a healthy complexion. She writes that oats in the form of flakes, porridge, or grits are almost as good as spelt. Oats are not suited for consumption by the sick, however, as they require good circulation of the

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**Spice Cookies for the Nerves**

These cookies not only remove all bitterness from the heart, but they also sharpen intelligence and enhance all 5 senses according to Hildegard.

- 1 ½ cups butter
- 3 cups brown sugar
- 2 eggs
- 1 tsp salt
- 2 ½ tsp cinnamon
- 2 ½ tsp nutmeg
- ½ tsp cloves
- 1 cup grated almonds
- 4 tsp baking powder
- 6 cups spelt flour

Cream the butter and sugar until fluffy. Add the eggs and beat well. Add remaining ingredients and knead thoroughly to combine, then roll into a log. Wrap in baking paper and refrigerate. Once it hardens (approx 2 hrs), preheat oven to 375°F. Cut dough into ¾ inch slices and bake on a lightly greased cookie sheet 10-12 min until cookies are golden.

Adults can eat 4-5 cookies daily; children should eat no more than 3, lest they become too smart!

*Strehlow, Hildegard of Bingen’s Spiritual Remedies, pg. 238.*
digestive system. Then she says eating fennel eliminates another characteristic of melancholy—bad body odor. “Fennel brings humans a sense of joyfulness and endows them with a beautiful complexion, pleasant body odor, and excellent digestion.” Savory gladdens the heart, and a weak heart can also be the cause of sadness. If the heart is afflicted, Hildegard recommends savory. “Individuals with a depressed nature are gladdened by eating savory. Eating this herb also cures and clears up the eyes.” Hyssop is an extraordinary remedy containing powers that provide happiness. She says to cook it with chicken. Also you should eat fresh hyssop marinated in wine and drink the wine too. “For such a disease (melancholy), hyssop is even more beneficial than for someone afflicted only by lung problems.”

Quenched Wine*

Bring half a glass of the best wine (red or white) to a boil. As soon as bubbles start to form, add a shot of cold water, remove the wine from the heat, and drink it while warm in small sips. When the entire family is angry with one another, quenched wine promptly restores peace in the home. The effect is dependent neither on the amount nor the content of alcohol in the quenched wine, because, as a result of the boiling, the alcohol evaporates as it simmers at a temperature as low as 176°F. Children or people sensitive to wine and alcohol receive only a shot glass or a few spoonfuls.

Strehlow, Hildegard of Bingen’s Spiritual Remedies, pg. 241.

4. Natural Beauty

Hildegard saw therapeutic value in wearing precious stones, using cosmetics to contribute to the sexual attractiveness of women, and she gave instructions for personal hygiene. Often she would recommend certain stones to be worn as jewelry around the neck at the throat or over the heart, or as a ring on the finger. (Sometimes she would even have the patient put the stone in their mouth several
times a day to treat certain illnesses.) Today we have greater insights into how crystals and gemstones carry electro-magnetic energy. The crystalline structure acts as an oscillator providing precise and regular frequencies. Many ancient cultures instinctively used crystals for healing or producing energy—Hildegard understood this. She felt that these stones were a visible form of the invisible God and thus possessed beauty and healing power. For each vice that she identified, she also observed which plants and crystals or gemstones would aid in correcting that vice. For instance amethyst would help control hemATOMA and coagulation, emerald which represented the entire vital energy—viriditas, could repair damaged cellular structures and support wound healing on the molecular level such as with chronic leg ulcers or other slow healing wounds. To increase spiritual wisdom, trust, and faith have a sapphire set in gold, then wear it on a chain and lick it several times a day. Jasper must have been one of her favorite stones—she usually directed that it be put in some orifice—nose, mouth or ear for various problems like hay fever, sinusitis, earache but then she also recommended placing jasper on your heart until it became hot, to treat arrhythmia and heart pain. She also prescribed gemstones to absorb the negative energy of abnormal thoughts, emotions, and spiritual weaknesses and then transfer only positive natural energy to the person.

Hildegard had much to say about sexuality, but then medieval people were far less inhibited about sex than we are today. Hildegard writes that human beings possess three powers in their sexual capability: sexual desire, sexual drive, and the sexual act. She is quite explicit in

The odor of Frankincense will help clear the eyes and purge the brain. She would pulverize frankincense and add it to a bit of fine wheat flour and egg white and put them in the sun to dry. These little cakes were to be smelled or tied with a cloth to the temples for treating the brain.

She was correct in using frankincense for the brain—frankincense is anti-tumoral. It is a universal healing oil good for most systems in the body. It lifts ones spirits to a higher plane. Use it for allergies, arthritis, asthma, brain injury, concussion, confusion, coughs, depression infection, laryngitis, mental fatigue, and more.

Chamomile is warm and has a pleasant juice. She recommended using it in an ointment for painful intestines. Rub it on the belly for menstrual pain or for sharp pains anywhere in the body.

German chamomile is very useful for intestinal griping pain for adults and colic in children. It neutralizes allergies, is good for skin conditions, migraines, and to support the pancreas. Roman chamomile is sweeter and milder and is a better choice for infants and children. It is doubtful that Hildegard had access to Roman chamomile since it loves warmer climates.
her descriptions of each which might lead one to ask how a nun in a cloister should know such things. But we have to remember that thousands of people sought her out for counsel on health problems, relationships, sexuality, depression, unhappiness, and a whole host of other emotional issues. I’m sure there wasn’t anything she hadn’t heard before.

I note her comments on sexuality in this section because Hildegard had lots to say about menstruating women and the importance of cleanliness. Spikenard, chamomile, and fennel were commonly cited to bring on menstruation. In *Physica* she recommends bathing in boiled tansy and feverfew to soothe the pain of ‘obstructed menses’ (I believe she means cramps) as well as taking a porridge of chamomile and wheat or drinking a mixture of yarrow, bearberries, cloves, pepper, honey, and various other herbs. Hildegard also knew a great deal about childbirth because nuns were often the midwives for local women and even in the absence of a priest, hearing their confessions before labor because of the high risk of mortality and then baptizing the baby in case of stillbirth. She talks of using oil of thyme, lily, or musk rubbed on the midwife’s hands to ease the turning of a baby in the womb or the enlarging of the mother’s cervix.

Physical beauty figured prominently in her theology. “God has adorned the universe with glory and beauty. He has filled it to overflowing with the riches of creation, for the service of humankind.” And, “the light of God illumines humans so that they appear in all their beauty and perfection of form and in all the shapeliness of their bodies.” Human beauty was for her, the ultimate mirror of all God’s glories. “Happy knowledge” enables human beings to perceive the mysteries of God’s beautiful works. It is happiness that allows Hildegard to record: “How beautiful your eyes are when you proclaim the works of the Lord!”
The body in all its sensuality is beautiful she says, because in it we glimpse the door that opens onto the infinitely mysterious beauty of God. Scholastic scholars in her day would have had a different description of the body since most closely followed Augustine in believing that the soul was all important, and the body was not since it dies and decays and goes into the earth.

As for personal hygiene, Hildegard had suggestions for everything from hair care to dental hygiene, from bathing to cosmetics. She had directions regarding every excretion and secretion in the body, including comments on hormones and our sex lives. She believed in the old adage I was brought up in, that is, “cleanliness is next to godliness.” For her, it was so that we remain beautiful. She defended her nuns dressing up in white veils with crowns, and jewels, and rings on their fingers for special holidays—dressing for the bridegroom—Christ.

5. Exercise/Movement

I am impressed with her comments on exercise that warrant common sense and moderation in all things. In Causes and Cures she says that if a person who is healthy is active—he is not greatly damaged by the fact that he moves his body. On the other hand, anyone who is weak should sit, for if he worked or stood too much, he would be hurt by it. Since she believed that women were the “weaker sex” and had differently formed skulls, she advised that women should only move about and stand in moderation, and sit more than run, lest she suffer damage. But on the other hand, she states that anyone who rides a horse rarely experiences damage even if he becomes tired riding because it is out in the fresh air! However, she adds that he should now and then pay attention to his feet and thighs and constantly exercise them by movement and stretching.

Hildegard praises fennel for its ability to not only combat depression but suggests that fennel oil is a natural tranquilizer and tonic for muscular energy, especially after sports and convalescence from a severe illness. As for improving digestion,
she also recommends taking a walk after the evening meal and before retiring for the night.

Hildegard believed that we become more loving when we toughen our bodies with fitness, wear scratchy clothing, and begin the day with a ritual combination of brush massage before we shower and exercise and meditate. Many of her recommendations for spiritual healing involved bodily exercise. To heal injustice you need the spirit of justice, which is a gift that comes from intense fasting and physical exercise. As for the scratchy clothing, she comments on this many times as a way of toughening up the body along with cold water and brush massage.

According to Hildegard, a truly cultivated way of life benefits especially from music which she presents as a sovereign medicine and first-class form of therapy. I add it here because of the physical stamina it took to sing her music. She talks of the sounds of the universe—all of creation—that come together in one great concordance and unique harmony. The entire cosmos as she saw in her visions is a well-tuned musical composition. The whole creation is a single hymn in praise of God. Humanity, however, is no longer in perfect tune with the *musica mundana*, the natural music of this world. Music changes the nature of body and soul so powerfully that healing energy flows in every cell of our bodies. Music she said, can within moments release rage and pain or increase energy by recuperating body and soul. It can open our senses and thinking, cleansing everything. Music creates a oneness in the inner and outer world and makes everything holy, whole, and healthy. Hildegard teaches us that music regenerates, purifies, sanctifies, and harmonizes everything instantaneously, both body and soul.
The prophets longing to restore and renew our connection to God, wrote psalms and songs to arouse the devotion of those who heard them and they even invented various musical instruments to accompany them tunefully. She goes on to say that it is a grave matter to forbid the singing of God’s praises. God is to be praised with sounding cymbals. Music is a reminder that the soul has its origin in heavenly harmony.

6. Light and Air

The world as seen through the eyes of medieval people was composed of the elements—fire, air, earth, and water—which formed our bodies and help sustain us during the course of our lives. Hildegard used the image of a revolving wheel encircled by moving layers of air that supported and energized life. “The air sends forth dew and causes everything that is green to sprout, sets the breath of the wind in motion, entices the blossoms to burst forth, spreads warmth, so that everything will ripen fully.” She uses a rich symbolism to explain how the balance of nature supports the ecosystem in which we live. Trees, birds, and even precious stones vibrate in resonance with the earth.

I find it amazing that Hildegard described how air and water can be polluted to the point of disaster through the interference of humanity, the “cosmic rebel” as she calls us. People bear responsibility not only for their private lives and personal happiness but also for their fellow human beings, for the environment and the universe as well. Many have interpreted her visions on this as inspiration for environmentalists in our day.


Light and air naturally send their greening power to germinate the seeds and in this way keep everything in the world alive for the benefit of humanity. Thus light and air are sources of nourishment.

7. Work and Relaxation

We are supposed to work only six days of the week and rest and celebrate on the seventh. She observed that “people are often caught up in the incredibly hectic stampede around them. Then they undergo extreme physical and mental stress trying to keep up with everything, as if that were the ‘be and end all’ of their existence.” She warns that people should take care not to ruin their bodies with too much work! And she adds, “I sincerely trust that God makes sure you are a true temple of life.”

In her cosmology, God decided to create the world and he needed nothing more for the purpose. The earth like a dark lump emerged from his will as God intended. And the Father’s Word resounded: Let there be light! And the world was full of radiant beings. Her commentary on the six days labor of divine creation was a model for the work of human beings so that in their daily labor they may find the “pasture of life”, and lack nothing essential.

But with the fall of Adam all matter was shrouded in a mysterious darkness. In her story telling she shows how Adam was sent into exile, and banished into a life of misery. And he began to work. By the sweat of his brow he labored at his back-breaking labor in this melancholy world. So now he had to learn how to get rid of the flawed nature that he owed to the inadequacies of sight, hearing, smelling, and taste. Everything is now subject to decay and to disease. This resplendent light of the body is all but extinguished. This was her way of explaining why

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humans have to work so hard. Everything we see and experience in life has to be understood against a spiritual background.

**Conclusions**

Hildegard sees living in moderation and practicing discretion as key to living vitally within a network of relationships—day and night, light and darkness, work and relaxation, health and sickness, warmth and cold, silence and sound, movement and stillness, sorrow and joy, fullness and emptiness. Subjecting ourselves to a fixed set of rules in our everyday life is part and parcel of a sensible lifestyle she instructs. I understand her to mean living a balanced life with attention to self-care, to accepting authentic values and meaning in life. She observes that it is quite natural for humankind to conduct their lives in this way—for all nature has an underlying impulse to move from a natural toward a cultivated state. So, she encourages us to cultivate a holistic balanced life that is in harmony with all of nature. Hildegard is reaching out to our age and telling us that this is a crisis—read that as opportunity—to make changes for wholeness and health. Self-care of body/mind/spirit should be a conscious awareness on our part as we live in our modern world that is filled with electronically sophisticated distractions and temptations to do otherwise. Although some of her holistic admonitions may seem quaint today, we can still learn a great deal from her for this millennium.

Hildegard’s works center on Light, Beauty, Life, and Joy. Her startling conclusion was that a life of joy was contingent on self-love. “If you love God, you love your salvation. And loving yourself in all this, you shall also love your neighbor.” Her images are both powerful and refreshing as they tell us how we can be in harmony with nature, each other, and with God. You could study her words of wisdom regarding holistic approaches to wellness and never tire of seeing anew how to practice self-care. It is as refreshing today as it was a thousand years ago.

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### Appendix

**Vices and Virtues Identified by Hildegard of Bingen**

*With Organ/System and Physical Disorders Identified by Dr. Wighard Strehlow*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Negative Forces (Vices)</th>
<th>Positive Forces (Virtues)</th>
<th>Vertebra</th>
<th>Organ/System Physical Disorder</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Material love</td>
<td>Heavenly love</td>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Eyes, inflammation, infection, arthritis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Petulance</td>
<td>Discipline</td>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Ears, Liver, infection, asthma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Love of entertainment</td>
<td>Love of Simplicity</td>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Nose, larynx, trachea, asthma, hay fever, colds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Hard-heartedness</td>
<td>Compass</td>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Mouth, bronchi, lungs, heart arteriosclerosis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cowardice</td>
<td>God’s Victory</td>
<td>C5</td>
<td>Skin, herpes, psoriasis, shivers and fever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. anger</td>
<td>Tranquility</td>
<td>C6</td>
<td>Immune system, autoaggression, viral infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Inappropriate mirth</td>
<td>Yearning for God</td>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Lymphatic system, back pain, viral infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Gluttony</td>
<td>Abstinence</td>
<td>Th1</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal system, heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Bitterness of heart</td>
<td>Generosity</td>
<td>Th2</td>
<td>Intestinal system, gallbladder, heart, inflammation, allergies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Wickedness</td>
<td>Devotion</td>
<td>Th3</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal system, gastro-cardiac symptoms, gas, constipation, bleeding hemorrhoids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. lying</td>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>Th4</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal system, Gastro-cardiac symptoms, ulcers, cancer, polyps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Contention</td>
<td>Peace</td>
<td>Th5</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal system, liver, bile ducts, pancreas, colitis, gastritis, Crohn’s disease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Unhappiness</td>
<td>Blessedness</td>
<td>Th6</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal system, pancreas, Colitis, gas, cancer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Immoderation</td>
<td>Discretion</td>
<td>Th7</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal system, liver, biliary tract, pancreas, heartburn, gastritis, colitis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Doomn</td>
<td>Salvation</td>
<td>Th8</td>
<td>Stomach and intestinal system, liver, biliary tract, pancreas, migraine, asthma, pre-cancer, fibromyalgia, sciatica</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Arrogance</td>
<td>Humility</td>
<td>Th9</td>
<td>Small and large intestines, liver, pancreas, muscles, nerves, joints, inflammation, infection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Envy</td>
<td>Charity</td>
<td>Th10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Thirst for Glory</td>
<td>Reverence for God</td>
<td>Th11</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Disobedience</td>
<td>Obedience</td>
<td>Th12</td>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Lack of faith</td>
<td>Faith</td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Desperation</td>
<td>Hope</td>
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<td>22</td>
<td>Obscenity</td>
<td>Chastity</td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Justice</td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Lethargy</td>
<td>Fortitude</td>
<td>L5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Oblivion</td>
<td>Holiness</td>
<td>S1</td>
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<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Instability</td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>S2</td>
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<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Concern for Worldly Goods</td>
<td>Heavenly Desire</td>
<td>S3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Obstinacy</td>
<td>Remorse</td>
<td>S4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Craving</td>
<td>Letting Go</td>
<td>S5</td>
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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Discord</td>
<td>Concord</td>
<td>Coccyx 1</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>Scurrility</td>
<td>Reverence</td>
<td>Coccyx2</td>
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<td>No.</td>
<td>Affliction</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>Vagabondage</td>
<td>Stability</td>
<td>Coccyx3</td>
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<td>33</td>
<td>Occultism</td>
<td>Dedication to God</td>
<td>Coccyx4</td>
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<td>34</td>
<td>Avarice</td>
<td>Satisfaction</td>
<td>Coccyx5</td>
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<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Melancholy</td>
<td>Heavenly Joy</td>
<td>Skull</td>
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</table>

*Hildegard of Bingen’s Spiritual Remedies* by Dr. Wighard Strehlow, pp.3-7.
Bibliography


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