



Essential Alchemy

The Ancient Art of Healing Naturally

Season 4, Episode 15: Limbic System Reset with Cathleen King

Jodi Cohen: Hello and welcome to Essential Alchemy. Alchemy is defined as the power or process that changes or transforms something in a mysterious or impressive way. My hope is that the information in this podcast can help you transform your mood, energy, physical health, or even some dots to help you shift your mental or emotional state. I'm your host, Jodi Cohen, a bestselling author, award-winning journalist, functional practitioner, lifelong learner, and founder of Vibrant Blue Oils, a company that sells proprietary blends of high-quality, organic, or wildcrafted essential oil remedies designed to help you return to your ideal mental, physical, and emotional state. You can find out more about me and my company at vibrantblueoils.com. And with that, let's get started with today's episode.

I'm so excited to share one of my favorite new finds. Dr. Cathleen King is the founder and CEO of Primal Trust Academy and community, which weaves together brain retraining, vagus nerve toning, somatic movement, and trauma-informed attachment repair techniques in an online worldwide platform that is unbelievably accessible, unbelievably brilliant, and so helpful. She was trained as a physical therapist with a passion for teaching neuroscience-based practices, targeting the brain and the nervous system. Her focus is to help people with self-healing from chronic illness and trauma patterns, and I will throw in autoimmunity, anxiety, and depression. I think that your platform is so accessible and so helpful for everyone. So thank you so much and thank you for taking the time to spend with us.

Cathleen King: Thanks for having me.

Jodi Cohen: So we were talking a little bit before we started filming about, I'm obsessed with vagus nerve toning, but there's more to the puzzle. So can you lay out limbic impairment and cell danger response, I mean, big topic, but the variables that are throwing people off?

Cathleen King: Yeah, absolutely. So we have a nervous system, an autonomic nervous system, and a lot of things are influencing that nervous system. So if you want to self-regulate your biology or improve your health, you want to target the thing that's causing a lot of the issues that you might have. And our nervous system innervates every cell, and every organ of our body. So it's a big system and we have our brain, and in our brain, we have our limbic system, which is our emotional center.

Cathleen King: That emotional center is constantly looking for threats and making associations based on the past or what it thinks might happen in the future. So one of the things that we do is something called brain retraining where we teach our limbic system to dial down that threat response or turn down the volume of fear and vigilance. And the cool thing is that you really can biohack your own limbic system.

You can turn down anxiety and threats and fears and even overreactions to foods and chemicals and things like that through doing limbic system retraining. Now we also have our vagus nerve, which runs from our brain all the way through our body and through lots of organs of our body. It's this, it's also called the wandering nerve because it runs everywhere and some people even call it the master control switch of our health, meaning when our vagus nerve is operating optimally, we're going to have good health. When the vagus nerve might be under operating, our health might start to decline because the vagus nerve is responsible for putting your autonomic nervous system to rest and digest and repair. So just think about if this switch isn't working very well, it might be hard to go into rest, digest, and repair. Or sometimes when you're so stressed, the vagus nerve gets super activated and just throws your whole body into shutdown or dorsal vagal, meaning we don't have energy for anything and it's just like an emergency break of the system.

So learning how to target your vagus nerve with different exercises is going to help your whole nervous system have more flexibility and handle stress. It's going to improve your digestion, your detoxification, your organ function, and it's just super important. And the whole thing is tied together. You use the term cell danger response, that's a term that was coined by Robert Navio, and I think he's a brilliant man who's really describing what I think the future paradigm of what health will be looked at as we are starting to all get on board with his theory. And it was a theory that I learned several years ago, and to me, it was like this is the lens of how healing happens by understanding the theory behind the cell danger response, because that theory really points to the necessity of targeting the autonomic nervous system in order to self-heal from most conditions actually targeting the autonomic nervous system.

What he's saying in this theory is that your cells are always kind of looking out for is there pathogens or toxins. And if they sense a threat, there is an innate mechanism of the cell to close down, to harden up and to protect against those pathogens and toxins so that the cell isn't destroyed. So when you get exposed to a virus, a pathogen, a bacteria, toxins, things like that, even a physical injury, the cell goes into a cell danger response, which is a good thing. It's protecting itself. The deal as this theory describes that some people don't come out of cell danger response when they should or when the threat has passed. And if you don't come out of cell danger response because your nervous system is still thinking that you're under threat, then you're going to stop detoxifying as well.

Cathleen King: You're not going to absorb nutrients as well. Your immune system gets dysregulated and you can end up very, very sick. The approach that I take with the limbic system, the vagus nerve, and even the somatic nervous system work, is to help the cells move out of cell danger response so that we can move back into thriving and repair. That was a very long-winded answer, but that is the science in a nutshell.

Jodi Cohen: Was elegant and what really hit my heart was this idea we all think we have Lyme or autoimmune or mold or whatever it is. We have all these different diagnoses and we think that that's what's going on. But the root cause of all of them is that our body is not responding to the threat the right way. Theoretically, if our nervous system is regulated, if our limbic system is regulated, and if our cells are able to get out of cell danger response, it's like the three little pigs. It's not that the bad wolf is so powerful, it's that the house was made of straw. The root of kind of making sure that we're all resilient and able to handle the winds of life is making sure that our own internal responses are in the right gear.

Cathleen King: Yes, yes. Just yesterday I was talking with a man who does live blood cell analysis and he was showing me what happens in cell danger response live with blood. And it was fascinating because you could see these certain cells that literally looked like ghost cells. They were just hardened and not doing anything. And of course, not all of them were that way, but some of them were. And then there was this neutrophil on the slide with these bacteria around it. The neutrophil is your immune system, part of your immune system, and it was just sitting there doing nothing, absolutely nothing, letting the bacteria move all over. And he is like, this body is not responding appropriately to the bacteria in the body. And so here's the challenge. He's like so many people get these lab tests and they're like, oh, you've got Lyme, Bartonella, Baia, et cetera, and we need to kill it.

Well, yes, herbs and supplements help, but if your immune system is just sitting there going, don't really know what to do right now, you're only going to get so far. And so he says instead, this is why getting that immune system out of cell danger response, cleaning up the things that also helped that are contributing to that immune system kind of going dormant like molds and things like that, that can really affect the immune response, helping your own innate immune system to open up and to see it's time to take care of business. And that's what the nervous system works to help the immune system do.

Jodi Cohen: And what you're really doing is going upstream, right? Downstream is kind of all these presentations of symptoms and diseases that we've classified, but upstream is really why are you not able to respond to this? And for people who are listening, those could be symptoms like anxiety, overwhelm, fatigue, depression. It doesn't necessarily need to.

Jodi Cohen: I think by the time they have this serious diagnosis, then they're really invested in finding you. But there's a lot of low-hanging fruit that happens before the tipping point where it's too much. I mean, I just really feel like everyone needs these tools.

Cathleen King: I agree. I agree. I mean, we are all living in a very toxic world and a very stressful, world full of stress. Our food is not clean. We lack minerals, we're lacking nutrition, and our nervous system needs all the help it can get to stay optimized to even maintain basic healthy functions.

Jodi Cohen: And I love the way you kind of unpack it. Can you talk a little bit about the polyvagal ladder so people kind of know where they're at then some of the tools that you use to just get it really is climbing up a ladder health.

Cathleen King: So the polyvagal theory was coined by Steven Porges and it's an incredible understanding of the different states of our nervous system response. And he describes three different states of the nervous system that we are primarily in. The first state he calls ventral vagal and think about a ladder, and at the top of the ladder would be your ventral vagal state, and that is the state where you are interested in connection, you feel safe, you're feeling like getting out in the world, your face shows that you are safe, happy, content, et cetera. So that's at the top of the ladder. So we're going to use the ladder as a metaphor. And then the next state he calls sympathetic, which is in the middle of the ladder, and the sympathetic state is your go button. So the gas is on, you're going to go, maybe you're motivated and excited, but it can also turn into anxiety and anger and running and fighting. So it's movement and that is a normal state of the nervous system in certain situations. And then at the bottom of the ladder is a state called dorsal vagal, which can look like absolute collapse, shut down freeze, which is sort of a mixture of sympathetic and dorsal vagal where you're just not able to move your tired. Maybe you are afraid and you're just so shut down that you don't even know how to get into life. It can be overwhelming, depression. So that's at the bottom of the ladder.

Jodi Cohen: Lack of motivation for me.

Cathleen King: Yes lack of motivation.

Jodi Cohen: Scrolling seems like a good idea and you're like, where did that hour go?

Cathleen King: Where exactly? Dissociating, spawning, and people-pleasing can even sort of be in that stage. And so these are different stages of your nervous system that it's important to notice where am I on this ladder. Am I at the top of the ventral vagal? Am I in the middle with a lot of motion or am I at the bottom and starting to feel collapsed? And he describes that obviously ideally we want to be able to be in ventral vagal or if we're going to be in a restful state, we're feeling restful but safe. So we're not always going. Sometimes we are just relaxing, but we feel safe. But the deal is in order to get to that top of the ladder, you have to climb up the ladder. And this is the hard part of nervous system work. When you move from that collapsed shutdown fatigue stay, and you want to come back up into safety, you've got to climb through the rungs of the ladder.

There's no way around it. You've got to climb through it. And so sometimes nervous system regulation might make you feel more anxious. You might have a little insomnia, you might start feeling angry. All of the things that were in that part of your nervous system might open up and be felt as you start to climb up that ladder into safety as you're doing nervous system work. So it's a really great way of understanding the nervous system. There's an author by the name of Deb Dana who explains this work even better in my opinion. She's got some great books. If you're interested in the polyvagal theory.

Jodi Cohen: One of the things that I really love about your program is that you really do teach people. You really educate upfront. I think a lot of people jump into things and they're actually getting better, and so they get into sympathetic dominant, and there's that fear response. I think that when you've suffered and you haven't felt well if something kind of sets you back or you perceive it to set you back, you feel worse before you feel better. You get very afraid like, oh, this isn't working. I'm doing it wrong. You speak to self-doubt. Can you speak to that a little bit just in kind of moving through the stages and the healing process?

Cathleen King: Yeah. So I found that after working with many people, a lot of people would basically sabotage their healing because they would start to do nervous system work and then they would get symptoms or different emotions and they would think, this isn't working. I need to find a new program, a new tool, and a new coach. But what they didn't understand is they were actually going through the normal process of nervous system regulation, which is sometimes to have an increase in sympathetic activity or an increase in detoxification symptoms and things like that. So in my program, I very clearly outline the stages of healing of what to expect. And I described the bumpy ride of healing, the bumpy ride of nervous system regulations so that when you hit those roadblocks, you understand why they're there and you can trust the process because you're using the tools and doing the work.

Cathleen King: And so when you hit that bump, that feels pretty tumultuous. You're like, okay, this makes sense. I knew this would happen. My nervous system is starting to discharge things. My body's starting to discharge things. Maybe your immune system is waking up and you start getting all flu-like, which is normal. You want your immune system to wake up if it's been shut down, but it doesn't feel good. I do a lot of education to prepare people to handle the journey.

Jodi Cohen: No, I love that because I think forewarned is forearmed, right? So they know, oh yeah, you told me about this. It's going to be okay. It feels safe.

Cathleen King: Right.

Jodi Cohen: I'm also curious as the queen of disassociation, I'm super good at not feeling the somatic exercises and actually having to be in my body. Can you talk a little bit about some of the protocols in the program, some of the things you recommend, and really the somatic experience and how that helps people feel safe and be in the why it's important to be in the body?

Cathleen King: Yeah. A lot of us have a relationship where we think our therapy, where we think our process of healing and we think we're doing it because we learn it, we can teach it, we get it mentally. And if you are a very mental person, dropping into the body and actually feeling the experience of healing is a whole different ball game that you might not even know how to do. And so the somatic portion of the program helps you to learn how to develop that relationship of feeling the feels of the body, getting in touch with your body's needs, its urges, and honestly some of the trauma that's stuck in there and the energy. So sometimes it doesn't feel good to be in the body, and sometimes it does. You're like, oh, I'm feeling this need, and that does feel good, or Oh, I actually feel like I want to rest and I'm going to give myself that need.

So it's a process of learning how to mentally pay attention to what's happening in the body and then your awareness becoming not just the mental thoughts, but the felt sense of being the human that you are, the felt sense of some of the personalities that are inside of you, whether it's your pleaser, perfectionist protector, the feeling of that in the body and forming a relationship with the body so that you can honor the body and honor its needs. Because the truth is that a lot of our symptoms, are just decoys or alarm bells that are letting you know that deep in the body, you don't feel okay, you feel unsafe. And so the brain comes up, the limbic system comes up with a way to get your attention, which might be pain or other sorts of symptoms, but underneath that pain is another alarm.

Cathleen King: There's another alarm that was never felt and recognized probably because at the time it was created, you couldn't handle it. You were too young to process it. So underneath that pain might be anger, it might be intense grief, things like that. And so we want to get in touch with our feelings so that we can feel what's at the root of what's been driving our limbic system in distress, what's been driving our perfectionism, what's been driving our workaholism. There's a feeling in there of not okayness that we need to get in touch with and hold space for so that it can discharge out of the body and we don't have to do these dysfunctional coping patterns to handle them anymore.

Jodi Cohen: Oh my gosh, that was so brilliant and so much to unpack. One thing I thought you were describing to me, it's much safer to be in my head. I think that Shakespeare has a quote, life is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel. So I try not to feel, but I think that's the reason oils work so well for me because it kind of get to my body. It's one of the senses, and I don't actually have to really be in my body. So it is kind of a workaround coping mechanism.

Cathleen King: Yeah, yeah. I mean, aromatherapy is the most direct way to the limbic system, and it's one of the best things that I think you can do to combine with the work I'm doing is finding sense that help you to trigger the emotional states that you're looking for to help you. If you notice you're getting really scattered, take a moment, become aware. Take some deep breaths of some type of essential oil that really helps you drop into the present moment and actually feel a little bit nourished in the present moment, and then you're going to feel safer.

Jodi Cohen: No, I love that. One of the other things that you talked about that I really like totally connected a dot, you kind of mentioned the coping mechanisms. Can you go into that a little bit? Like how some of us, and it's a little crazy because society if you are a control freak or a perfectionist and wildly productive, people reward you for that. They're like, oh, go here. Yes. And they don't necessarily realize that is a coping mechanism basically, if you have these personality traits, there's a reason. Can you speak to that a little?

Cathleen King: Yeah, absolutely. So when we're young, we often have different hurts that happen to us, different wounds, and our young self comes up with a strategy to be loved and a strategy to be safe. And the strategies can be different from person to person. Sometimes the strategy to be loved is to people please mom and Dad say yes, when you mean no, don't have any needs. And then when you grow up, you get into relationships where you're still the codependent people pleaser and you often find someone more dominant because that's the energy that you're used to.

Cathleen King: So that started as a strategy to be loved and to be safe. Same thing with perfectionism. Oh, if I do everything right, then I will be worthy enough to exist and I need to do it all right. Oh my gosh, everybody praises me when I get straight.

I am more worthy because I get straight. I know this pattern, and that becomes your sense of significance and worth, and it's an absolute utter threat to get a C because then your worth is just destroyed because it was never formulated by who you are. It wasn't reinforced by who you are. It was reinforced by what you did. And so that's another coping mechanism. Sometimes we have coping mechanisms of anger and control because we feel safe if we can control others and use our anger and be the biggest voice in the room so that they don't trigger us, and we know that they're going to kind of keep us from feeling our shame since we are the ones that are more dominant. And that's another coping mechanism is to be this dominant type, a strong big voice so that you are the one that's in the most control.

All of these are ways to be safe and to be loved. And when you really come to understand these parts, they're all benevolent. Even the angry narcissist is a benevolence, meaning they're just trying to feel good about themselves in some way. And if we can really get in touch with what we're doing and why we're behaving that way, we can befriend that part of us. And when we befriend that part of us, it means that our neural networks start talking to each other. You have this main self, this main adult self and you've got all of these protective parts of you. And when you start to get in touch with the reality behind what you do and why you're doing it in a compassionate way, those neural networks start to talk. And when your conscious self and your protective self start to talk, you actually have more choice and you're less likely to be hijacked.

You're able to feel that urge like, oh, I feel like working today because I'll get more significance. You can feel it, but then that other conscious part of you, if you're able to understand that you're just trying to get a need met and say, oh, I'm trying to get a need of significance met. What's another way that's going to help nourish me and not be just about getting things done and getting that reward? So it's a journey. You guys. This is a journey. I'm still on the journey. I'm still on the journey. I want to just emphasize that of knowing yourself.

Jodi Cohen: Yes. It's interesting. I kind of wonder when we have these programs running our leasing program, our perfectionist program, is that almost like the trauma pattern is kind of what we're still in that coping mechanism. So somewhere in our body, as long as we have the coping mechanism, the body doesn't feel safe.

Cathleen King: Yeah, I mean that's exactly it. If we're running that coping mechanism, it's the body still not feeling worthy, feeling loved, and feeling safe. Otherwise, we wouldn't need the coping mechanism. I mean, that's what we're doing to try to get that need met. And so until you can identify that need consciously, you're not going to choose differently. You're going to keep meeting it with the path of least resistance, which is what your neural pathways are wired to do, people-pleasing, perfectionism, workaholism, et cetera. So this is a process not only of nervous system regulation, but consciousness awakening, awakening to your patterns, to your needs, to your triggers, learning how to pause and be mindful and choose differently.

Jodi Cohen: You talk about your program a little bit, but just a little plug. I've only been doing it, I think I've been in it for two or three weeks, and the people in my life, my daughter, my boyfriend, have all noticed that I'm better able to regulate that. I'm less impatient that they've noticed situations where things went a little sideways and they're like, well, you really didn't react. And so I just want to give you huge kudos because that's for anyone who has those aspects of themselves. I used to joke, that I was never Goldilocks. I was either too hot or too cold, like, oh, it's fine, it's fine. Everything's fine, and then I'd blow up. I'm finding that way to ask for my needs, and people are actually saying, oh, okay.

Cathleen King: So you're growing up and that's what this is as a child. At some point, it wasn't safe to say what our needs were. And then we grew up and we realized, oh, I can ask for them. And with some people, they're actually going to respond in a positive way, and that's when life can totally change. You don't need those old behaviors to get your needs met because you can speak them and meet them in a new way.

Jodi Cohen: Please share a bit about your program, about how it's structured.

Cathleen King: Yeah, absolutely. So we have an academy and we have a community, and actually, I don't know if you have access to this book, but this is, maybe we could put it below in the show links. It's a book that I wrote that's free of how healing. Yeah, that would

Jodi Cohen: Yeah, that would be great. I would love for people to be able to download that. That's amazing.

Cathleen King: So we can put that below the show notes. And it's almost 130 pages, so it's like a mini-program, and it's going to describe everything I'm about to describe to you because it has the science and it has several tools and how the program works.

Jodi Cohen: So this would be a great way to just, and can kind of see the way your mind works. One of the things is if you like my stuff, you'll love Kathleen. She's very thorough, very organized, and really I think you explained things beautifully.

Cathleen King: Oh, thank you. I wrote that book for people to get an easy understanding of why nervous system work is so important, but once you sign up, it's a membership, so it's just a flat \$96 a month to cancel any time everything's included. We have an academy with hundreds of hours of courses actually, but level one is about 30 hours, and that's where you're going to learn all of your nervous system tools, over 40 tools, all of the science about why maybe you've gotten sick and how healing happens. And that's really to help you start to self-regulate and help your symptoms to be relieved. We also have a community which is live classes almost every day, sometimes multiple times a day. I'm teaching, other people are teaching, and that's for that support of how do you implement these tools? What are other people going through? How do I elevate my mood?

How do I regulate my limbic system? You're learning it in the course, but you're also practicing together as a community, and I find that that combination is really a win-win. Then we also have a level two program where we get into more of these trauma patterns that we were just discussing. It's important to have nervous system tools understood and practiced before you really start getting into what's been underneath the surface because it can get a little rocky. And so our level two program is to help you re-pattern your resistance, re-pattern, those protective patterns, re-pattern, what it was, that personality that caused you to get sick in the first place. That's where we are re-patterning that personality. So nervous system rebalancing personality, and re-patterning.

Jodi Cohen: That's really the gist of the program and I love that you call it regulate. I think that says everything. Yeah, I really do think that it's fabulous. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you'd like to share?

Cathleen King: Well, I think a lot of people wonder if it's possible for them to heal because their situation is different. It's been too long, they've got too many diagnoses, et cetera. I want to say to you that there is a root, root, root situation to most things, and that is your autonomic nervous system and how it's functioning, and how connected you are to your true self. And so despite what you've got going on, I've seen so many things heal by focusing on the nervous system, focusing on reclaiming their true self, and the body has wisdom. Even your body that's been sick for many, many, many years and lots of diagnoses, still has wisdom once you get the nervous system online and come out of cell danger response. So I just want to say there's always hope because some people think, well, that would work for someone else, but not me. You have a nervous system, you have a brain, this will work for you too.

Jodi Cohen: No, I completely agree, and I'm so excited because I think that I'm a big fan of layering. Use the oils, use your technique. The more you can kind of do, pick what it's like a salad bar, pick what you like, but it's great. Thank you so much. Share the name of your website again.

Cathleen King: Yeah, it's primaltrust.org

Jodi Cohen: This was unbelievable. Thank you for your brilliance and for everything you do.

Cathleen King: Thank you.

Jodi Cohen: Thank you so much for listening. I hope this podcast empowered you with some useful information and takeaways. If you liked this episode, please consider sharing a positive review or subscribing. I would also love to offer you my free parasympathetic toolkit as a gift just for listening. It will teach you how to activate the most important nerve in your body to turn on your ability to heal. This free toolkit includes a checklist, a video, and a detailed guide. If this podcast prompted any questions, you can always find answers at my blog at vibrantblueoils.com or my book Essential Oils to Boost the Brain and Heal the Body. Until next time, wishing you vibrant Health.