

All About Ayurveda

What Is Ayurveda?

Part I: The Vision By Arun Deva

As with all things whose origins are shrouded in the mists of time, the beginnings of Ayurveda are rooted in a mythological past. A myth is not necessarily a lie. Very much like a parable, it usually expresses a higher truth.



It is believed that the *Ashwini* twins gave the secrets of “the science of self-healing” to Indra and he, in turn, passed it on to *Bharadwaja*, one of the seven seers of the *Rgveda*. As Indra, the king of the *Devas*, represents *Prana*, and the *Ashwini* twins represent the duality of all cosmic creation, this myth can be seen symbolically as the natural progression of the eternal life force into the two sustaining forces of the Universe: inhalation and exhalation: the cosmic “spanda” or pulsation of all life. *Bharadwaja* represents the ability of man to access deep truths when in a state of full awareness or “*samadhi*.”

Similar to this are other myths with other persona, some divine, some mystical and some human. What is easier for us to comprehend is the belief that the great *Rishis* (seers) of India, moved by compassion for the welfare of all living beings, went into a deep state of *samadhi* (absorption) from which they extracted and made available the “science of life.”

The root words for Ayurveda are “*Ayus*” and “*Veda*”. Since *Ayus* refers to all life and *Veda* is pure knowledge, Ayurveda is much more than a medical codification; it is actually the knowledge of all life. As all healing arises from a “knowing” of health and what constitutes ill health, Ayurveda is thus best suited to address our well being and the lack of such.

It is said that perfect health is equated with happiness. It follows thus that perfect health means not thinking about your health. This is not as simple as it sounds. Every day we think about our aches and pains, about whether we have a headache, are stressed, are tired and worn out and even about whether we are constipated or worse! Imagine living in a state of such harmony that none of these factors are an issue. We are not talking about cancer, heart disease or immune system deficiency. We are talking about states that we consider normal! If we accept headaches and/or constipation as our “normal” state, worrying instead

about the arising of any of the major diseases that afflict modern man, imagine what our lives would be like if even our "normal" state of discomfort did not exist! That we had no aches and pains, no stress related exhaustion, always fresh and alert, able to rest exactly when we need to, eat correctly and wisely and function with clear, content minds, what would our lives be like?

This is the goal of Ayurveda and to achieve this goal, this wonderful science has mapped the human terrain: physical, mental and spiritual. It has mapped the terrain of the world that we live in. It has mapped the interaction between the two and found that the microcosm and the macrocosm do not exist independently, that when the two do not support each other harmoniously, we suffer ill health. That the further we get away from nature, the unhappier our lives become.

Ayurveda believes that each one of us has an original "blueprint", not unlike that of RNA/DNA. As long as we stay true to this "blueprint" which we call *Prakruti*, we will be healthy. *Prakruti* refers to our unique constitution or our "first nature". Over our lives we deviate from this *Prakruti* for a variety of reasons, of which Ayurveda lists eleven. We move away from harmony, which is nothing less than the correct balance of the forces and elements within us, not unlike the perfect "idle" of a car. Just as a car, over a period of time, needs to be serviced and the idle brought back to normal, similarly, to counteract the forces that shift us away from our *Prakruti*, we need to "be serviced" and then we need to "maintain".

Ayurveda is a living science in that it is based upon universal truths and not upon external circumstances that may and do change constantly. This allows it to be as valid to our lives today as it was to the lives of the people of the Indus/Saraswati Valley Civilization from where it arose, thousands of years ago. It has stood the test of time; it has survived countless invasions, the burning and other losses of its texts, the suppression of its practice and the lack of faith in its own homeland after the advent of western medicine.

Today, it is recognized once again as a valid, holistic science whose theories and texts are responsible for the discovery of many modern medicines and techniques. Many of our medicines today have arisen from research into the qualities and effects of herbs that were listed in the Charaka Samhita at least 1500 years ago. There is a society of surgeons in the United States named after Sushruta, who wrote surgical texts just as long ago. The two German scientists responsible for plastic surgery and rhinoplasty credit and acknowledge this same text as their primary source and inspiration.

Ayurveda has stood the test of time because it is a living science. It has and continues to evolve to meet the needs of all people at all times. Many great physicians have come along and using the theories of Ayurveda, created new healing modalities to address new illnesses. From the original texts of Charaka and Sushruta, through Vagbhatta and Madhava to present day scholars and teachers such as Drs. Lad, Robert Svoboda and David Frawley. What remain true and unchanging are the original principles. Principles that explain the very fabric of our existence and what that is woven from.

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Part II: The Vision By Arun Deva

Vata, Pitta, Kapha

While in Albuquerque, attending an Ayurvedic workshop, a group of us went to a restaurant to have some lunch. When the waiter overheard us talking “shop” he became quite excited. “I know all about Vata, Pitta and Kapha!” he said, “I just know I am a Pitta!”



There are many aspects to this story. The first is that I believe he was right. The second is how heartening it is to see the knowledge of Ayurveda spreading into the general consciousness of our society. I even know people who do not know the word “Ayurveda” but know Vata, Pitta and Kapha! The third has more serious consequences for those of us who teach about it. As the awareness of the doshas spreads, it becomes our responsibility to make sure that the truth of what they are does not get distorted.

Vata, Pitta and Kapha collectively are known as the tri-dosha. The word Dosha is difficult to translate as it has so many layers. Literally, it means “fault” or “blame.” It also has been translated as “humor.” If we think of humor as an “ill wind” then we can see how this connects to the first translation. However, taking responsibility for our actions does not necessarily mean taking “blame” for them. Therefore, the best way to look at the doshas is as “that which is responsible.”

To understand the doshas we have to first understand their composition. Ayurveda believes that all creation arises from five basic elements. The first of these is Ether and it is the container for all the others. It symbolizes all space within which structure can exist, from the space in the heavens to the space in your mouth. When ether begins to stir it takes the

form of Air, which is as much the movement of wind as it is the force that moves our hands and our thoughts. As this wind moves through you (and the universe) it creates friction leading to heat and is symbolized by Fire which is not only the visible fire we are familiar with but also the fire of our digestion. As this fire heats, it liquefies, leading to the Water element and in this manner, water is water as we know it but it is also the blood, plasma and other fluids within us. Eventually it will cool and cohere and we are left with the last and most stable element, Earth. Earth includes the structure of our bodies: the skeleton as well as the muscles and flesh.

Not only are these five elements the basic fabric of the Universe, they are also what make up the tri-dosha. Vata is composed primarily of the elements of air and ether; pitta of fire and water; and kapha is water and earth. These three together are the governing principles of our existence. As such, each lends its qualities towards creating our personalities and that is where we begin to learn about our individual natures. What makes us unique is the proportion and combination of these forces within us.

Because these principles are in reality nothing more than a collection of their qualities, even if you and I have the same dominant dosha, we may have quite different personalities. We will however have more in common with each other than with someone of a different doshic constitution.

Vata dosha will have certain qualities inherent from its elemental roots of air and space. People of this dosha may tend to feel cold and have dry skin. While either tall or short, they are invariably light framed: if they do put on weight, it will be mostly around the hips. They may be easily excited, and tend towards poor or light sleep. Under stress, they tend towards nervousness, anxiety, or fear. Although they grasp concepts rather easily, they have poor retention. In balance, vata types are creative and expansive, and can be very sensitive and intuitive individuals.

People of a predominantly Pitta nature have the qualities of fire and water, reflecting courage and intensity. They have a strong metabolism and their physique will be better formed than that of a vata. With their radiant eyes and sharp features, they are very focused and dedicated and are blessed with intelligence and a good memory. They generally eat well and often. Due to their fiery nature they are subject to inflammatory diseases and often their skin will reflect this by breaking out. Emotionally they may foster anger, hatred and jealousy. When in balance, they are focused, decisive and passionate, thus having good leadership qualities.

Kapha being primarily water and earth, people of this constitution are well built, even stocky. They have excellent bone structure and are very strong. Unfortunately they tend to put on weight easily and can end up becoming heavy. They have well-rounded faces with large eyes, a pleasant nose and full lips. Slow to comprehend things, once grasped they rarely forget them. Although they have tremendous stores of energy, they tend to be lazy and need motivation. Their systems are very strong but they are susceptible to colds and coughs when weakened. Naturally easy to get along with, they can become quite attached to things and even people and this can make them greedy and possessive. Given a goal, they will be meticulous in their performance, without one, they would rather just relax! In balance they are just, objective and easy to rely on.

Since none of us is entirely composed of just one dosha, we all have traits that we can identify with in each of these characterizations. However, we will also identify more with one of the dosha than the others and that gives us a clue to our nature. It also gives a trained Ayurvedic practitioner the keys to helping us heal. In the end, better health is based on being in harmony with our own inherent nature. When we are in balance, the different facets of our constitution reflect each other as one. This leads to a state in which we are well established and content in ourselves: *swastha*.

Three Pillars of Life

By Robert Talbert

The three pillars of life are a part of the bedrock that Ayurveda is built upon. They are so important that the *Caraka Samhita*, a classical ayurvedic text, states that one who manages these three pillars properly is guaranteed a full life span that will not be cut short by disease.

The three pillars of life are the proper management digestion, sleep and sexual energy. When digestion is proper, a person is able to rest well and when sexual energy is maintained, the body will reach its full potential. Much of what Ayurveda considers proper lifestyle surrounds these three pillars.

Digestion:

Proper digestion is paramount to our well being. Through proper digestion, our bodies are able to extract from the food all the nutrients present as well as the life energy (*prana*) of the food. Proper digestion, according to ayurveda,

has multiple levels. The end result of proper digestion on all levels is *ojas*, a subtle energy that protects the body and mind from disease. Proper digestion requires the intake of the ideal foods for a person's constitution. It also requires that food be consumed properly with due regard for how the foods taken are combined. When the choice of food is not appropriate for the constitution of the person or the food is taken improperly the result is a disturbance of one or more of the doshas. This eventually results in disease. Normal digestion for all doshic types should be symptom-less.

Sleep:

Proper rest is essential for the well being of any person. The body utilizes sleep as an opportunity to use its energy for healing and repairing damage to the body that accumulated during the waking hours. If the body does not receive enough sleep, the body cannot repair the damage caused by stress and strain. This leads to the body breaking down. Too much or too little sleep brings on consequences. Too little sleep upsets the *vata dosha*, while too much disturbs the *kapha dosha*. Disturbance of the *vata dosha* results in weaker tissues that are more susceptible to injury. Disturbance of the *kapha dosha* results in tissues that become excessive, stagnant, lethargic and immobile. As a general suggestion, be in bed by 10 pm and rise with the sun.

Management of Sexual Energy:

Ayurveda recognizes the value of the practice of *brahmacharya*, which is the practice of sexual abstinence. The sexual restraint requested by Vedic teachings does not come from a place of judgment or the threat of eternal damnation but as practical advice for those who desire to return to balance and build energy reserves in the body. Sexual release is understood to reduce the energy available for supporting the healing of the body and mind. Hence excessive sexual indulgence can leave a person in a weakened and exhausted state. This state is not conducive to healing. Sexual energy, called *shukra*, is needed to build *ojas*, the energy that provides stability to the body and mind and underlies the strength of the immune system. When *shukra* is depleted, *ojas* becomes depleted as well. A general guideline is for chronically ill to avoid sexual release for at least 30 days or longer. For balanced individuals a weekly release is appropriate.