

Ayurveda – The Oldest Science of Life

We are all aware of the scientific theories behind the evolution of Human life on this earth. It is an incredible development, but what is more amazing is the development and evolution of the knowledge and means to preserve human life. Preserving life must have been an on-going concern of human beings, in the face of overpowering and brute physical and biological forces. Without it, it is difficult to account for the continuity of human race and survival of its several highly developed cultures and civilizations like Egyptian, Babylonian, Jewish, Greek, Indus-Valley etc. which had their own equally glorious and useful systems of medicine and health care.

Development and growth of such a body of knowledge in India is referred to as Ayurveda, which was synonymous with the growth and evolution of Indian civilization and culture. We can find historical evidence of Ayurveda in the ancient books of wisdom known as the "*Vedas*". The science of Ayurveda, like the science of Yoga, was inspired and developed by the great masters and seers of ancient India. Ayurveda and Yoga played a highly complimentary role in the spiritual evolution and the maintenance of physical well-being and vitality. Ayurveda is, perhaps, the oldest science of life, a system of diet, healing and health maintenance that is deeply spiritual in origin. Ayurveda is believed to have been around for more than 6000 years. Ayurveda is more than just a medical system. It is, in fact, a Science of Life!

What is Ayurveda?

You must be wondering –What is Ayurveda? Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word derived from two words "**Ayur**", which means life; and "**Veda**", which means knowledge. It has its roots in ancient Indian literature, which is more than 5000 years old.

Ayurveda is a system that helps maintain health in a person, by using the inherent principles of nature, to bring the individual back into equilibrium with their true self. In essence, Ayurveda has been in existence since the beginning of time because we have always been governed by nature's laws.

It combines the positive concept of health to be achieved through a blending of physical, mental, social, moral, and spiritual welfare. The study of Ayurveda includes herbal medicine, dietetics, body work, surgery, psychology and spirituality. It not only deals with medical science, but also with the social, ethical, intellectual, and spiritual life of the human-being. Ayurveda amalgamates the accuracy of science and the sublimity of philosophy, poetry, and art. According to Ayurveda, a living creature is composed of the mind, the body and the soul. It is the compound of these three elements that constitutes the science of life. The principles of many of the natural healing systems now familiar in the West have their roots in Ayurveda, including Homeopathy and Polarity Therapy.

Ayurveda teaches us to understand our body, our particular nature, and our individual mixture of elements at a deep physical, mental and emotional level. With this knowledge, we are able to identify activities, conditions, herbs and foods that either keep us healthy and in balance, or make us ill and throw us out of balance.

Ayurveda is an integral part of the daily regimen of hundreds of millions of people worldwide. Its principles are utilized not only to treat persons who are ill, but also to prepare a balanced meal and to construct a harmonious environment to live in. Ayurveda brings to life the concepts of preventive health care and health promotion. The goal of Ayurveda is to help an individual discover the knowledge of living and health. Health is the state of harmony in a living being. Our health depends on the chemical environments inside and outside our bodies. Food plays an important role in creating the internal chemical environment.

Ayurveda sees medicine and diet as complementary rather than separate. No one can expect to retain vitality, recover from disease without the appropriate knowledge of the powerful effect that diet has on physical health, mental clarity and spiritual progress. Indeed, Yoga masters place great emphasis on diet as an integral part of the successful practice of any spiritual discipline. Ayurveda addresses not only healing, but also prevention and maintenance of vitality, as crucial in the practice of Yoga.

Ayurveda combines yoga, meditation, food, natural preparations, cleansing and regenerative treatments. The overall effect is physical strength, better health, mental clarity, inner peace and calmness. Ayurveda is the science of life, so to know more about it, we must know what life is.

Some of you may believe it to be same as Western medicine. Well, it is not so. Life, according to Ayurveda, is a combination of senses, mind, body and soul. It is clear from this definition of life that Ayurveda is not only limited to body or physical symptoms but also gives a comprehensive knowledge about spiritual, mental and social health. Unlike traditional western medicine, Ayurveda is not confined to healing of disease in a superficial treatment of symptoms. Instead, it evaluates all three elements of life.

Basic Ayurvedic Concepts

The Body

Life in Ayurveda is conceived as the union of body, senses, mind and soul. The living man is a conglomeration of three doshas – basic physical energies (*Vata*, *Pitta* & *Kapha*), seven basic tissues (plasma, blood, muscle, fat, bone, marrow and reproductive fluid) and the waste products of the body such as faeces, urine and sweat. Thus, the total body matrix comprises of the doshas, the tissues and the waste products of the body. The growth and decay of this body matrix and its constituents revolve around the food that gets processed into doshas, tissues and wastes. Ingestion, digestion, absorption, assimilation, and metabolism of food have interplay in health and disease, which are significantly affected by psychological mechanisms as well as by bio- fire (*Agni*).

According to *Ayurveda* all objects in the universe including human body are composed of five basic elements namely, earth, water, fire, air and vacuum (ether). There is a balanced concentration of these elements in different proportions to suit the needs and requirements of different structures and functions of the body matrix and its parts. The growth and development of the body matrix depends on its nutrition, i.e. on food. The food, in turn, is composed of the above five elements, which replenish or nourish the like elements of the body after the action of bio-fire (*Agni*). The tissues of the body are structural whereas doshas are physiological entities, derived from different combinations and permutations of the five elements.

According to Ayurveda, understanding the three doshas is the basis to health and healing. The concept of Vata - Pitta - Kapha is unique to Ayurveda and is very difficult to translate into Western terms. The three doshas which control the physio-chemical and physiological activities of the body are Vata (from ether and air), Pitta (from fire and water), and kapha (from water and earth). The three doshas can be recognized by their attributes. Vata, Pitta and Kapha are combinations and permutations of these five elements that manifest as patterns present in all creation.

Vata is the subtle energy associated with movement — composed of Space and Air. If you have a Vata constitution, you are likely to be artistic, creative and very imaginative. Your memory may be weak. Vata governs all movements within the body, stimulation of nerves, transmission of sensory stimuli, breathing, heartbeat, circulation of blood, oxygen, nutrients, thoughts, stimulation of digestive juices, movement of food in the G.I tract, elimination of waste from the body as urine and faeces, ejaculation, delivery of child from womb, expression of emotions. In balance, Vata promotes creativity and flexibility. Out of balance, Vata produces fear and anxiety.

Pitta is the energy of assimilation and transformation. Pitta expresses as the body's metabolic system — made up of Fire and Water. If you have a *Pitta* constitution, you have a very alert and focused mind. You may be irritable, jealous and aggressive by nature. You may be articulate, learned and proud yet discriminating and judgmental. You can take decisions and organize affairs well. Argumentative, but your excellent selective memory makes you fast learner. *Pitta* governs digestion, absorption, assimilation, nutrition, metabolism and body temperature. In balance, *Pitta* promotes understanding and intelligence. Out of balance, *Pitta* arouses anger, hatred and jealousy.

Kapha is the energy that forms the body's structure — bones, muscles, tendons — and provides the "glue" that holds the cells together, formed from Earth and Water. *Kapha* supplies the water for all bodily parts and systems. It lubricates joints, moisturizes the skin, and maintains immunity. If *Kapha* predominates in your constitution,

you will have a steady, reliable mind. You will take time to learn, and will remember what you have learned. There can sometimes be elements of dullness with a *Kapha* mind: it is usually content not to seek fresh mental stimulation. In balance, *Kapha* is expressed as love, calmness and forgiveness. Out of balance, it leads to attachment, greed, and envy.

Health and Sickness

As per Ayurveda - Health or sickness depends on the presence or absence of a balanced state of the total body matrix including the balance between its different constituents. Both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors can cause disturbance in the natural equilibrium, giving rise to disease. This loss of equilibrium can happen by dietary indiscrimination, undesirable habits, and non-observance of rules of healthy living. Seasonal abnormalities, improper exercise or erratic application of sense organs and incompatible actions of the body and mind can also result in creating disturbance of the existing normal balance. The treatment consists of restoring the balance of disturbed body-mind matrix through regulating diet, correcting life-routine and behavior, administration of medicine and resorting to preventive *Panchkarma* – the cleansing therapy very popular in spas and *Rasayana* therapy – the rejuvenating therapy.

Diet and Ayurveda

In Ayurveda, regulation of diet as therapy has great importance. This is because it considers human body as the product of food. An individual's mental and spiritual development as well as his temperament is influenced by the quality of food consumed by the individual. Food in human body is transformed first into chyle or *Rasa* and then successive processes involve its conversion into blood, muscle, fat, bone, bone marrow, reproductive elements, and *ojas*. Thus, food is basic to all the metabolic transformations and life activities. Lack of nutrients in food or improper transformation of food leads to a variety of conditions of disease in the human body.

Life presents us with many challenges and opportunities. Although, there are several things on which we have little control, we do have the power to decide about some things, such as diet and lifestyle. To maintain balance and health, it is important to pay attention to these aspects. Appropriate diet and lifestyle strengthen the body, mind and consciousness.

It must be emphasized that Ayurveda is not a substitute for Western allopathic medicine. There are many instances when the disease process and acute conditions can best be treated with drugs or surgery. Ayurveda can be used in conjunction with Western medicine to make a person stronger and less likely to be afflicted with disease and/or to rebuild the body after being treated with drugs or surgery.

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