

AN INTRODUCTION TO ĀYURVEDA

Āyurveda is an ancient system of health care said to be of divine origin and timeless--without beginning. It arose in the consciousness of some enlightened being(s) who had the consciousness and desire to know the science of life. It exists primarily as an oral tradition even though there exist several important written references, which record some of this ancient wisdom. Technically, Āyurveda is the science of life--the knowledge of life span and of the functioning of living beings. This means that Āyurveda is the study of how the life span of living organisms--and especially human beings--can be increased. And Āyurveda is the study of how living organisms function (physiology)--how to restore, to maintain, and to enhance functioning. The goal of Āyurveda is balance and this is experienced as well being and longevity when physiology is normal.

Āyurveda is more than a medical science. It is in fact a synthesis of three distinct disciplines: science, art of medicine, and philosophy. As a science it studies aspects of biology, anatomy, physiology, chemistry, etc. We can say that these various branches of science reflect that objective nature of Āyurveda. The subjective nature of Āyurveda (philosophy) is reflected in its many discourses on the nature, purpose, and scope of life. As an art of medicine it deals with etiology, symptomology, pathogenesis, and therapeutics--in some way blending values and facts to promote balance, happiness, and long life. Ca. Su. XXX.23-27

Life Defined

Āyurveda holds that life (Āyus) is the conjunction of mind, body, and soul (spirit, Consciousness, or Being). This means that no life exists without some underlying theme of intelligence and self-endowed power--something unmanifest but nevertheless existing and potentiating all of reality and creation. The mind and body are fundamentally the instruments of the soul to express itself and to bring about change. Mind and body are nothing other than the expression (expressed values) of non-material Being. Each mirrors the other in its functioning; therefore, if we observe one we will also know the status and functioning of the other. Mind and body are intimately connected and interacting--they affect one another and express one another. This is an important distinction between Eastern and Western science. See Ca. Su. XXX.22-24

Contrasting Approaches

This point is important because Āyurveda aims at all aspects of life--the complete value of life: mind, body, emotions and spirit / Consciousness. While the focus of a particular program may seem narrowly focused on the body, for example, because of the interaction of all the components any benefit to the body, for example, will lead to side benefits in mind, emotions, and spirit. Further, Āyurveda can affect each individually with different techniques so as to try to bring to bear a complete plan of health. Remember that the object of study and treatment includes all of these components, together.

Another important distinction of Āyurveda is that it emphasizes the field or body over the disease or invader. Āyurveda is not so much interested in the vector or germ theory Āyurveda holds that the body/mind which functions perfectly disallows disease. Therefore, Āyurveda focuses on physiology and tries to make it perfect. This is the essence of natural healing. In Āyurveda one studies health--not disease--to understand health. We can say that disease is "cured" not by attacking it directly with drugs and other programs which interfere with the mechanism of disease but by restoring proper functioning of the systems which normally and automatically disallow and destroy disease. For this reason Āyurveda investigates the nature and balance of the body/mind first and the symptoms or disease last. Programs must restore physiology of THAT body/ mind. This includes concerns for age, state of mind, season, place of residence, customs of the area, strength of the person, strength of the disease, the prakṛti, imbalance, strength of digestion, specific tissues and organs affected, drug options, diet, lifestyle, elimination and so on.

Additional distinctions relate to the roles played by the Āyurvedic practitioner (called Vaidya--meaning one who

knows) and the patient. The Vaidya is elevated to the role of guide or teacher. While the patient is the focus of the balancing programs it is the patient who must do this or stop that. The Vaidya points out the cause(s) and thus gives the patient direction away from these to restore balance and normal functioning. The balancing is done by one's own nature, automatically and effortlessly. This is a partnership in a healing process--not a dictatorship. We will point out other distinctions in the discussion below.

The Model

Āyurveda describes the body as being composed of three functional entities, called doṣas, 7 tissues, and 3 waste products. The doṣas are vāta, pitta, kapha, and may be described as metabolic principles. They have characteristic qualities and serve to govern specific functions. Vāta deals with the energy of the universe that expresses as motion such as in functions of circulation, respiration, movement, locomotion, elimination, nervous system functioning, speech, enthusiasm, and creativity. Its qualities include mobile, cold, light, dry, rough, clear, and subtle. Pitta deals with energy which expresses heat and light such as in the functions of digestion, metabolism, intellect, vision, body temperature, complexion, courage, and cheerfulness. It includes all transformations or changes of energy; e.g. material food into non-material heat, movement, thought and vice versa. Its qualities include hot, sharp, light, oily, liquid, and spreading. Kapha is about energy that expresses as physical structure and deals with fluid balance, secretions, binding, growth, potency, patience, heaviness, compassion, and understanding. Its qualities include cold, oily, smooth, heavy, static, hard, liquid, dense, dull, cloudy, and gross. The physical body is actually made up of 7 tissues: plasma/lymph, red blood cells, muscle, fat, bone, nerve tissue/bone marrow, and sperm/ovum. These aspects comprise the wholeness of Consciousness expressed as mind, body, and emotions.

An essential element of this paradigm is the notion that people can be effectively described as representing predominantly one or more of these principals. This gives expression to the terms *body typing* or *constitutional types*. Thus it is that through emotions, behavior, physical traits, and functioning we can describe a person as a vāta type or pitta type etc. This concept of body typing is called *prakṛti* in Sanskrit. It has two fundamental values: 1) It serves as a permanent balance point for a person's entire life and 2) It suggests themes which, by their liveliness, will need to be balanced throughout life. That part of physiology that is lively will be more reactive to similar qualities and will tend to want to go out of balance first. Diseases will tend to manifest in the area of the dominant *doṣa* of one's *prakṛti*.

Digestion and Elimination

Āyurveda holds that the two most important processes in the body are: digestion and elimination. It's important to remember that when we speak of the body we are also implying mental processes. Therefore digestion is a transformation process which applies to non-material stimuli as well as to food or air, etc. Digestion is primarily catabolic, but also anabolic, and includes absorption and assimilation. Breaking "things" down and rendering them assimilable or understandable is the essence of this process. Digestion, when good, is said to be the root of good health and long life.

On the other hand, elimination, when poor, is said to be the root of all imbalances (disease). When ignorance, beliefs, bad habits, or wastes, toxins, (ama in Sanskrit) remain in the body/mind then imbalance or disruption of physiology results. Typically this manifests as blockages or other defects of the channels of elimination and nutrition. In order for physiology to be perfect everything unusable, whether mental, emotional, or physical, must be timely eliminated. By the way, the mind does have its own channels but they are subtle and are located throughout the entire body.

Balance and Imbalance Defined

The most commonly accepted classical definition of health is given by Sushruta: *He, who being established in*

the Self, having balanced doṣa, digestion, tissue formation, bodily processes, elimination, and whose mind, senses and spirit are full of bliss, is a healthy person. This is a daunting goal but it is definitely quantifiable and measurable. This serves as our reference for health or non-health. It is the continuous and perfect flow of energy and intelligence throughout the body, mind, and soul.

On an abstract level physiology is that term which expresses the general flow of intelligence--a flow of energy and information. All disease is nothing other than some disruption in this flow of information in the body/mind. Disease is loss of awareness--a separation of mind and body functioning. Mind serves to recognize and interpret sensory data from the environment and when mind and body don't communicate completely imbalance in physiology results. Imbalance in the physical body is described in terms of the interaction of vāta, pitta, and kapha. Whenever a *doṣa* misbehaves, individually or collectively, this is called imbalance. This present status of the *doṣas* is called *vikṛti* and when excessive may be called high pitta or kapha, etc. Whenever the present state of physiology is other than that established at the time of conception / birth this is imbalance. The primary imbalance may be in the mind or body but will always manifest in the mind, emotions, and body.

Cause and Effect

Determining the cause of disease is somewhat complex. There are three broad themes of causation and they all interact: astrology, direction, and *doṣa*. 1) Vedic astrology, called Jyotisha, gives understanding of the effects of planetary arrangements on our lives and it helps understand the effects of past actions on the present and future. 2) The ancient science of Sthāpatyaveda tells us that orientation in terms of east and west etc, has predictable effects on physiology. For example, sleeping with the head to the East is favorable for quality rest, while sleeping headed to the north is least favorable for health. 3) And Āyurveda says that the cause of disease in the body is the *doṣas* or governing principles, vāta, pitta, kapha. Only the three *doṣas* can produce disease in the body. The mind can be adversely affected by two qualities of functioning called rajas and tamas. Rajas is the quality of being over-active and promotes wrong desires such as addiction and aversion.. Tamas is inert to sensory input. It promotes greed, overeating, and so on.

Classical writings indicate that the fundamental cause of disease is *prajnāparādha*, meaning mistake of the intellect or intellectual blasphemy. We commit mistake of the intellect when we go against the laws of nature. This always produces some negative consequence. One classical writer, *Caraka*, says that these mistakes manifest in three ways: 1) we do a right thing but at the wrong time 2) the sense organs are misused in manners excessive, perverted, or not at all 3) we misuse the mind. This misuse of the mind has three components: 1) The intellect may fail to perceive things as they really are 2) there may be no self-restraint or steadfastness or 3) memory of Self as source of the laws of nature may be defective.

Above we said the cause for imbalance or disease is mistake of the intellect. A universal law of cause and effect (Law of Karma) applies. Understanding this law is necessary to alter or maintain thought, action, and speech in a direction of harmony with nature. This law is based on the principles of similarity and dissimilarity. Similarity means adding apples to apples to get more of apples. Thus a quality added to or applied to something produces an increase of that quality--bringing similars together increases both. Heat applied to a body increases heat in that body--it feels hotter. Or happiness from the people around us makes us feel happier, and so on. Opposite qualities cause decrease--bringing opposites together decreases intensity of both. Heat applied will cause cold to be eliminated or to be less intense. Or happiness dispels its opposite--sadness. These qualities affect the *doṣas* or governors of physiology. And by the way, heat (for example) from the emotions (anger), from the sun, from spicy food, gives the exactly the same instruction to the body. No matter what sense processes the experience the body will respond to it essentially the same. Thus we can control, reduce, balance, and pacify imbalances in physiology by adding the opposite of a quality in excess. Our therapeutic approach aims to control the governors because they control the body. If a quality is needed then just add it—if you are cold just find some heat. Disease, in this context, is just the experience of too much of something. The *something* may be good or bad but if taken chronically the body may not be able to maintain balance and

disease may result.

The maxim of Āyurveda is *form follows function*. The structure of the body will manifest change even in mental or emotional imbalances. This is truly a mind-body model. Research of the modern science of neuroimmunology supports the notion of mind-body interactions. Non-material thoughts are now associated with and manifest as neuropeptides when we have thoughts with emotional content. These physical molecules become the physical body and serve to guide its functioning. Anxiety will definitely have its physical expression. A most important thing to remember about the Āyurveda concept of disease is that it is a process. It is a style of functioning—whether mental or physical. And we know the nature and structure of disease through the *doṣas*--their qualities. A disease is a kind of disorder but within this disorder is order because a disease has an observable expression and development. We do not need to name a disease to be able to treat it.

Disease implies the presence of toxicity. In Āyurveda this toxicity has two distinct forms: āma and doṣa. Āma is a sticky, morbid substance that interferes with physiology. It means uncooked or unripe. It arises in poor food combining, as normal cellular metabolic waste, and as toxins such as petrochemicals or heavy metals in the food, water, and air, and as unprocessed emotions. A common disease associated with the presence of āma is rheumatoid arthritis. The *doṣas* have a physical expression of their excessive presence and functioning: vāta = gas or air, pitta = bile, hydrochloric acid, etc, kapha = excess phlegm or mucus. Arthritis is a disease of air, ulcers of bile, edema of mucus, for example. Āyurveda wants to eliminate these and prevent them from recurring. The Āyurvedic approach is given below.

The Āyurvedic Program for Health

In general, Āyurveda recommendations may touch on any aspect of life including lifestyle, diet, and food supplements to help restore some specific intelligence missing in the physiology. A well-known approach to Āyurveda lists 20 separate technologies for restoring balance and promoting happiness--meditation being foremost in its thinking. But all of the techniques fall in one of two types: rational or intuitive. Rational guidelines are rules that are applied according to specific situations and in a broad sense include:

- 1) removing the cause—this is always done gradually and this varies from habit to habit, person to person
- 2) eliminating excesses from the physiology by purification, such as pañcakarma, yoga, exercise, diet
- 3) balancing with opposing qualities—such as diet mantras, lifestyle, etc.
- 4) rejuvenation by rasayanas (those things which nourish/rejuvenate) such as Amṛtam. Chyavanaprash and Amrit Kalash are well known variations on this theme

Usually these 4 techniques are applied in the sequence given above. In cases of bodily weakness the reverse order may be desirable. Efforts focus first on ama (toxic accumulations in the body) and then digestion because they are interrelated and lastly on imbalances in specific areas (tissues) of physiology.

Intuition is the ultimate tool of health. It is an expression of our own inner intelligence, which is said to be perfect. Intuition gives us information and understanding instantly and accurately. When knowing occurs without the reasoning process then intuition is active and life is spontaneously balancing. Often it happens that intuition occurs but the intellect (the next thought) casts doubt on the first thought. We need to learn to trust this process.

We call this functioning Self-referral--meaning that we are constantly aware of our inner nature and our outer nature and we act to integrate and fulfill needs of both areas continuously and simultaneously. Self-referral is a way of living—it is a means and goal of life. Practicing it leads to the spontaneous flow of life, fulfillment, and balance all at once.

There are two fundamental experiences, comfort and discomfort. They operate through memory and intellect to produce appropriate thinking, acting, speaking. We can use them to assist clouded thinking or intuition. When

we experience comfort with eating a certain food then memory helps us to know for future purposes that that food is good for us. Memory tells us that we get burned when we put our hands in the fire, etc. Being Self-referral will guide us to exactly the appropriate activity, its quantity, and its duration if mind functions properly: good memory, clarity of perception, and restraint. Being aware that you are tired or hungry, etc. is the first step but this must be coupled with mental clarity for proper action to result. Normal physiology is a spontaneous and perfect adjustment to those constantly changing conditions necessary to maintain balance, whether as gross as eating or as subtle as the immune response.

Because disease produces pathogenic choices in the advanced stages of its development we tend to crave bad things. Thus both rational and intuitive approaches will be necessary. Cleansing routines help the sensory apparatus to function more accurately. This leads to more nourishing actions. This helps intuition to function in a more lively way also.

With all this in mind a unique diagnostic tool of Āyurveda pulse assessment, plays an important role. With the trained palpation of the radial artery, or other arteries, one can detect imbalances that may become full-blown symptoms of what Westerners call disease. The pulse is a window through which a Vaidya detects the cause of imbalances—the *doṣas*—as well as their symptomatic expressions. Often disease has multiple doshic involvement and this interaction is observable in the pulse as well. This is important because Āyurveda recognizes many paths which lead to a particular symptom or imbalance. Western approaches don't appreciate fully the idea of one symptom / many causes as there is no Western model which views disease as a specific manifestation of a general theme of physiology such as wasting diseases—*vāta*, inflammatory—*pitta*, and congestive--*kapha*. Thus it is that Āyurveda can treat disease at the root and symptomatic levels. It can prevent and cure disease. Not all diseases can be cured at all stages however. Āyurveda is not a quick fix and present laws disallow much of the powerful pharmacopoeia available to Āyurveda.

We hope that this review is useful to help you--the student on the path of Self-discovery--gain an overview of some of the important issues. The model we have described is broad and deep although our treatment has been cursory. Try to remember that this is only a model and not a description of reality. It is a way of understanding Nature but it is not Nature, Itself. Remember that this may be the only paradigm that includes spiritual issues as matters of life and health, despite our meager treatment of this area. The concept of *doṣa* is an extremely useful device for understanding health and disease. Understanding it is the key to life. We hope that you will regard all of this as an elaboration of what is natural, expanding, and liberating--not that which is restrictive or unnatural, because life really is all possibilities. We look forward to helping you discover and maintain your nature, full potential, and happiness.