Ayurveda: an introduction.

History of Ayurveda

A comprehensive understanding of Ayurveda requires a detailed look at its long history, from its source to the various interpretations it has been subjected to, through the centuries. The original verses of Ayurveda are said to be derived from the consciousness of Lord Brahma the Creator, and carefully internalized by his disciples. These were passed down among the Gods, until they eventually reached the three Great Sages - Dhanwantari (in his Divodasa avatar), Bharadwaja, and Kashyapa - who setup different schools of treatment and thought on Earth.

In the course of time, Ayurveda branched out into three categories, namely Shalya Chikitsa - Surgery, Kaya Chikitsa - General Medicine, and Kaumarabhritya - Paediatrics. These had a huge influence on the way diseases and ailments were approached and treated, as the Sages sought this knowledge in times of great plague and pestilence.

The third important phase of early Ayurvedic history is marked by the composition of the first medical literature on the subject that was invaluable in disseminating Ayurvedic philosophies and treatments across the world.

Evolution of Ayurveda and the First Medical Literature

Ayurveda in its modern-day form appears in the age of the Samhitas, which are massive compendiums compiled by disciples of the Three Great Sages named above. Medical literature and its specialized and detailed approach ensured that generations would gain the fruits of this natural science. Its detailed and methodical approach, now clearly accessible to highly trained vaidyans [physicians], paved the way for the Ayurvedic medical practices that are seen today.

In Sanskrit, Ayurveda means “The Science of Life.”

Ayurvedic knowledge originated in India more than 5,000 years ago and is often called the “Mother of All Healing.” It stems from the ancient Vedic culture and was taught for many thousands of years in an oral tradition from accomplished masters to their disciples.

Human Pathology

Any sickness can be treated with a deeper understanding of our own self. Our body reacts to a large number of internal and external factors and any imbalance or impurity created by these causes illness. Equilibrium within our body is hence extremely essential. Ayurvedic texts talk about bhutas, or constituent elements of the human body, which trigger the mechanisms responsible for all bodily functions. This knowledge helps us understand the true causes of ailments, and how we can attempt to treat them.

Ayurveda divides the governing systems of the human body into Dosha, Dhatu and Mala. It elaborates the various types of diseases, physical and mental. Finally, it also shows us how we can reverse the degradation and begin the process of healing.

Doshas: your combination of the five elements.

Ayurveda teaches us that our bodies are vessels comprising five basic elements: Space, Fire, Earth, Water and Air.

Doshas are essentially a combination of these primary elements, and the combination of Doshas we have by birth is responsible for all chemical activities inside us. Each human has her own affinity to a Dosha, and it is this factor that causes different people to have different body compositions, immunity levels, behavioural patterns, and responses to various external stimuli. Our uniqueness has a direct bearing on the balance of Doshas within us.

There are three types of Doshas in the human body: Vata, which is composed of Space and Air, Pitta, of Fire and Water, and Kapha, of Earth and Water. Each of these Doshas, be it in excess or deficit, can have a major impact on the functioning of the body.

Vata.

Comprising Akasha (Space) and Vayu (Air) elements, Vata Dosha pertains to mobility and flow. It enables all motion-related bodily functions. Most of the body's motor and sensory operations are controlled by Vata. It is seated in and around the intestine, pelvic region and bones. However, the colon is said to be the primary location of Vata. Being in charge of movement, it is vital to the regulation and flow of both Kapha and Pitta Doshas through the body.

Imbalance of Vata can adversely affect regular body functions like heart rate, respiration, speech, blood circulation and excretion.

Attributes common to those with Vata pre-dominance are restlessness, leanness and creative spirit.

There are 5 types of vata:

Based on the specialized functions that it performs in different parts of the body Vata is further sub-divided into Prana Vata, Udana Vata, Vyana Vata, Samana Vata and Apana Vata.

Prana means life and Prana Vata governs the functioning of the brain, the lungs and the heart. The flow of this Vata from the cranium down to the rest of the body controls all mechanisms vital to the survival of any individual.

Udana Vata deals primarily with the respiratory system and the organs of speech. Breathing is controlled by this Vata.

Vyana Vata circulates from the heart to every other part of the body and back. It is in charge of all involuntary actions inside the body.

Samana Vata decides what stays, leaves, or is produced by the body. It governs the stomach, the intestines and the liver. Fluids excreted from the body including sweat, semen and urine are controlled by this Vata.

Apana Vata is said to be seated in the lower part of the body, specifically, the colon. It deals with the removal of faecal matter from the body. It also plays a crucial part in excretions from the groin area.

Pitta.

Pitta Dosha is created from Agni (Fire) and Jala (Water) elements, and is responsible for heat generation inside the body. It deals predominantly with digestion and how the body transforms consumed food. The body's metabolism, which is basically the rate at which it burns energy, is governed by this Dosha. Said to lie between the stomach and the small intestine, it controls a host of bodily functions.

The entire digestive process falls under the purview of Pitta - from consumption to transformation. Colour perception, perspiration and regulation of body temperature are regulated by Pitta as well. An imbalance in Pitta can cause severe issues related to self-esteem, memory, enthusiasm and overall intellect. Body functions entailing energy consumption require this Dosha to work properly.

Five types of pittas:

Pitta is the digestive fire that governs the body's metabolism. There are five types of Pitta based on their specialized function, namely, Pachaka Pitta, Ranjaka Pitta, Sadhaka Pitta, Alochaka Pitta and Bhrajaka Pitta.

Pachaka refers to digestion, and this form of Pitta exists primarily in the stomach and the intestine. The entire digestive process is governed by it.

Ranjaka Pitta is primarily seated in the liver and the spleen, and it is concerned with the production of blood.

Believed to reside in the heart, Sadhaka Pitta is associated with the maintenance of emotional balance during times of extreme distress.

Alochaka Pitta is said to be located in the retina. It controls vision and colour perception.

The Pitta in the skin, Bhrajaka Pitta is responsible for skin tone and complexion.

Kapha.

Kapha Dosha is a combination of Jala (Water) and Prithvi (Earth) elements. Its role is said to be that of binding energy. It draws energy from the core elements it is made up of and acts as a lubricating force in the body. It is seated primarily in the chest and stomach cavities. Ayurveda attributes the stability of our physical body to Kapha.

Some of the common symptoms of Kabha imbalance include nausea, excess salivation, lethargy, sluggishness, drowsiness, weight gain and loss of appetite.

Those with a pre-dominance of Kapha attribute are said to possess relatively greater emotional control, higher stamina and strength, and a more sober nature. However,

they are likely to develop water retention and weight gain issues in the absence of regular exercise or physical activity.

Five types of kaphas:

Kapha is an indicator of strength and represents the binding energy that holds our physical self together. Based on its specialized function, Kapha Dosha is further sub-divided into Avalambaka Kapha, Kledaka Kapha, Tarpaka Kapha, Bodhaka Kapha, and Sleshaka Kapha.

Avalambaka Kapha is mostly located around the chest area and is considered a shield for the heart and the respiratory system.

Kledaka Kapha performs the dual functions of breaking down the food we consume into digestible portions and protecting the lining of the stomach from the acids that facilitate digestion.

Located in the head, Tarpaka Kapha protects the sensory organs from damage and provides lubrication to the nerves.

Bodhaka Kapha is primarily found in the mouth and on the tongue. It moistens the food we consume to make it more digestible.

Sleshaka Kapha is present in all joints, providing lubrication and stability to them and ensuring their long-term safety against wear and tear.

The seven Dhatus

In common terms, the seven types of Dhatus are plasma, blood, muscle, fat, bone, bone marrow and reproductive fluid.

In Ayurveda, they are called Sapta Dhatus - Rasa, Rakta, Mamsa, Meda, Asthi, Majja and Sukhra respectively.

Rasa Dhatu's dominant element is Jala (Water). Aided by Vata's mobility, it circulates nutrients, hormones and proteins throughout the body.

Rakta Dhatu has Agni (Fire) as its primary element, and its red shade is due to the presence of Pitta. It preserves human life by transporting oxygen and nutrients throughout the body.

Mamsa is the tissue that covers all organs and is related to strength and stability.

With Jala and Prithvi (Earth) as its dominant elements, Meda is solid and firm. It is the storage site for excess fat in the body.

Asthi gives the body its stability. Nourished by the food consumed, it makes the human body strong.

In Ayurveda, Majja is associated with the nervous system and it is considered to govern metabolic process in the brain and the spinal cord.

Sukhra is said to be the essence of the Dhatus as it is responsible for life, vitality and energy.

Malas

Malas are vital clues to human pathology as they are the by-products of bodily functions. The three important Malas are - Purisha (Faeces), Mutra (Urine) and Sveda (Sweat) - and these are generated from food. Other Malas are cellular wastes such as excretions from nose, eyes and ears. Hair is also a Mala where the body expels waste in the form of hair.

Malas must be discarded by the body regularly for it to function properly. Malas can transform and affect Dhatus, which will in turn impact the balance of Doshas. This can cause a series of ailments. Hence, wastes formed after the energy burning processes in the body have to be expelled. Mala-related problems include hair loss, abdominal pain, urinary tract infection, fungal infections, dehydration and body odour.

Ways of healing

Raayana Chikitsa

The legendary Rasayana Chikitsa, or Rejuvenation Therapy, is often considered synonymous with rebirth, for it completely revitalizes the body, eliminating the ill-effects of all previous disorders. Its cleansing effect gives a second lease of life by completely decontaminating the body, mind, and spirit.

Rasayana is derived from two separate Sanskrit words: Rasa meaning the "basic essence that nourishes the body," and Ayana meaning "path". Hence, Rasayana stands for a nourishing pathway. Rasayana Chikitsa is a holistic revitalization therapy aimed at treating nutrient deficiencies, with a focus on the constituent elements of the body.

PANCHAKARMA

Panchakarma is a rejuvenation therapy in Ayurveda. The Pancha (Five) Karma (Action) approach to disease prevention is a combination of five tried-and-tested treatment techniques that revitalizes patients by restoring their physical and mental equilibrium.

Panchakarma's value lies in the herbal and organic medicines used, which exempts it from the risks of side effects, common to many modern-day drugs. The concept behind it is that a majority of sicknesses are caused by consumed foods and environmental toxins. Panchakarma treatment is unique since it ensures both short-term and long-term well-being of the individual. It scrupulously avoids the instant gratification approach. Shamana and Shodhana are the two categories of rejuvenation therapies practised.

Basic theory of Pancha karma

There are two concepts that govern Panchakarma and Ayurvedic treatment approaches - one: a disease is caused when there is an imbalance or excess ama (toxins)

in the body, and two: a rejuvenation therapy is required to return the body to its equilibrium. The treatment methods used for rejuvenation fall under two broad categories: Shodhana and Shamana.

Shodhana deals with detoxification of the body and containment of the spread of amam. Shamana is the healing treatment that sets the body on track for rejuvenation and revitalization. Thus, Panchakarma removes unwanted materials from the body first and then renews the bodily functions of the patient.

Prakriti: Your unique body type.

Each person's combination and proportions of vâta, pitta and kapha are determined by the genetics, diet, lifestyle and emotions of the parents, among other factors, at the time of conception. The combination of the three doshas, which forms the person's constitution and is set at conception, is called prakriti. Prakriti is simply the unique psychophysical makeup and functional habits of a person.

There are seven possible combinations of vata, pitta and kapha. For example, a person might be mostly kapha with a secondary characteristic of pitta and a small amount of vata. In ayurveda this would be written V1P2K3. A person might be equally pitta and vata with a small amount of kapha. This would be written V3P3K1. The numbers serve to suggest the ranking of each dosha. A few rare individuals are born with a constitution where all three doshas are equal in quality and quantity, V3P3K3. These people experience good health and excellent digestion. However, the majority of people will have one or two doshas predominant. With proper diet and lifestyle, these people can maintain balance and optimal health. The prakriti, as one's genetic code, does not change during one's lifetime, except in rare cases.

Not every person with the same ration of doshas in their prakriti is identical. This is because, even though the quantities of the doshas are the same, the qualities express in different ways. For example, a person with V3 may be more cold while another with the same proportion may be more dry.

Vikruti.

There is also a state called vikruti, which reveals the present state of the tree doshas. If the present state of the doshas is the same as prakriti, that person is balanced and healthy. In a person of excellent health, the proportions of vikruti will be the same as prakriti. But more likely there will be a difference, for vikruti reflects any aspects of diet, lifestyle, emotions, age, environment, etc., that are not in harmony with one's prakriti. An ayurvedic physician can establish this difference throught a variety of procedures that include taking a life history, analyzing the face and tongue, and taking the pulse.

It is this differencence between prakriti and vikruti that provides the ayurvedic physician with precise information to formulate a program for restoring health. No matter what the constitution, it is possible to achieve optimal health throught proper diet, cooking methods, lifestyle, and an attitude towards life that specially suits each individual.

There are four general categories which describe prakriti: janma prakriti, deha prakriti, dosha prakriti, and manas prakriti.

Janma Prakriti. Janma prakriti is also called karma prakriti, because it reflects the effects of karmic influences on the constitution. We are bound to birth and death by karmic forces that influence the physical, mental, astral, and causal bodies. The cause of birth is desire. When we take birth (at the moment the soul enters the foetus), the karmic momentum of the individual manifests from the causal to the mental body then to the astral body and finally to the physical body. The resulting individual constitution is janma prakriti. We have chosen our parents through karmic bonds. Moksha (liberation) cannot be attained until all karmic seeds are roasted in the flame of attention, meditation.

Janma prakriti is the genetic prakriti, which is determined at the moment of conception. This genetic prakriti is a combination of the ratios of VPK in the mother and the father at that time. Diet, lifestyle, and mental/emotional factors affecting the parents can influence the qualities of VPK in their sperm and ova.

Deha Prakriti. Deha prakriti is the curent bodily prakriti. It includes the fetal prakriti during pregnancy, which is influenced by the mother's diet, lifestyle, environment, and mental/emotional states. Janma (genetic) prakriti can be altered by these maternal influences and long-standing congenital abnormalities may result, which means deha prakriti is different from janma prakriti. For instance, due to aggravation of the doshas in the fetus caused by the mother's diet and lifestyle, the baby could develop cleft palate or spina bifida.

Deha prakriti reflects the dharma associated with a particular birth. Behind every dharma is karma, which is action. Dharma is duty, responsibility. The mother's dharma and actions influence the baby's constitution. The deha prakriti is also a physical expression of the causal, mental, and astral bodies. The physical/psychological makeup reflects the dharma that the individual has taken birth to perform, and the individual will possess abilities that make it possible to fulfill that dharma.

Dosha Prakriti. Dosha prakriti represents the ratio of doshas present at the time of birth, when the baby takes its first breath. The season, time, place, date, and planetary disposition at birth can all affect dosha prakriti. Dosha prakriti is deha prakriti expressed in terms of vāta, pitta,and kapha.

Manas Prakriti. Manas prakriti is a term that defines the mental constitution. Manas prakriti is described in terms of the three gunas - sattva, rajas, tamas. Sattvic qualities of mind are clarity, alertness, attentiveness, love, compassion, and cooperativeness, Rajasic qualities are self-centeredness, selfishness, and restlessness. Rajas is movement; the movement between the observer and the observed, between subject and object. Tamasic qualities express as dullness, gloominess, depression, sadness, and laziness. Tamas is crystallization of experience.

Manas prakriti is also part of your genetic code. Right at the time of fertilization, the sperm and ovum join, carrying vāta, pitta, and kapha from the parents. Similarly, they carry sattva, rajas and tamas from the cosmic mind. The cosmic mind maintains equilibrium of sattva, rajas and tamas. Cosmic tamas creates darkness. Cosmic sattva creates the rising of the sun. Cosmic rajas creates the movement of the earth and galaxies. So, in the cosmic mind, sattva, rajas, and tamas are perfectly harmonized, qualitatively and quantitatively. That is why there is order in the cosmos.

‘

Characteristics of the Vata individual

Vata is the principle of mobility that regulates all activity in the body, from how many thoughts one might have during a given period to how efficiently food moves through the intestines. The vata quality is responsible for joy, happiness, creativity, speech, sneezing, and elimination, to name just a few functions. Vata is in charge of the vital life essence, prana. Thus when vata (prana) leaves the body, life ceases.

Vata has the qualities or attributes of dry, light, cold, rough, subtle, mobile, and clear, with an astringent taste, and brownish and blackish colors. Physically, vata persons have light, flexible bodies and big, protruding teeth. They have small, recessed, dry eyes. With irregular appetite and thirst, they often experience digestive and malabsorption problems. Vata typers tend to be delicate in health.

In their behaviour, vata individuals are easily excited. Indeed, they are alert and quick to act without much thinking. They have good imaginations and enjoy daydreaming. Vata individuals are loving people but may love someone out of fear or loneliness. Fears of darkness, heights and enclosed spaces are not uncommon in vata individuals. Their faith is flexible and ready to change, but the change does not necessarily last for long. Because of this tendency to change, vata people may often move furniture or residence to keep from feeling bored. They do not like sitting idle and seek constant action. Due to their active natures, they make good money but spend it on trifles and have difficulty saving.

Characteristics of the Pitta individual.

The word pitta is derived from the Sanskrit word TAP, meaning to heat an to be austere. Pitta represents the Fire principle in the body. Literally everything that enters the body must be digested or ‘cooked’, from the sight of a full moon to a strawberry popped into the mouth. In addition to the gastric fire, pitta also includes the enzymes and amino acids that play a major role in metabolism, and even the neurotransmitters and neuropeptides involved in thinking. Some of pitta’s responsibilities are regulating the body heat through chemical transformation of food and giving a person appetite, vitality, learning, and understanding. Pitta is hot, sharp, light, liquid, spreading, and slightly oily in nature. It is sour, pungent, and bitter to the taste, and has a fleshy smell. It is associated with the colors red and yellow. These qualities are revealed in the body of the pitta person. Pitta people have a sensitive and reactive body with a medium frame and weight. They seldom gain or lose much weight. They may have sharp, yellowish teeth with soft and, at times, bleeding gums. Their eyes are bright but tend to be sensitive to light. Pittas usually have strong appetite and thirst and like cold drinks and sweets.

Pitta types have excellent capability for learning, understanding, and concentrating. They are highly disciplined and excellent leaders. These people are blessed with wisdom, which is sometimes reflected by baldness – so much wisdom, indeed that it ‘burns’ off their hair! Pitta individuals never yield an inch from their principles, which sometimes leads them to fanatism. They may give a wrong answer but with great confidence.

As a matter of fact, they can be judgmental, critical, and perfectionistic, and tend to become angry easily. They love noble professions and often make large amounts of money to spend on luxurious items. They like perfume and jewellery. They may not have a strong sex drive. Overall, the pitta constitution is endowed with moderate strength, much material knowledge, wealth, and a medium span of life.

Characteristics of the Kapha individual.

The phrase kapha comes from two Sanskrit roots, ka meaning water and pha meaning to flourish – that which is flourished by water. Kapha's nature is also earth, so earth and water give kapha its definitive qualities. Kapha comprises all our cells, tissues and organs. Kapha molecules tend to stick together to form dense masses and give the body a chubby shape. Lubrication of joints and organs, strong muscles and bones, cellular secretions, and memory retention are all part of kapha's function.

Water and earth give kapha the qualities of heavy, slow, cool, oily, liquid, slimy, dense, soft, static, sticky, cloudy, hard, and gross. It has a sweet and salty taste and is white in colour.

These qualities give a strong and large body frame, large eyes, strong teeth and thick, curly hair to people of kapha constitution. They have thick, smooth, oily and hairy skin.

Kapha people have a steady appetite and thirst, but tend to have slow digestion and metabolism. These characteristics often result in weight gain, which kapha people have great difficulty in shedding. At times, cravings for sweet and slat lead to water retention. They love eating, sitting, doing nothing, and sleeping for a long time.

Kapha people are blessed with a deep, stable faith, with love and compassion, and a calm, steady mind. They have good memory, a deep melodious voice, and a monotonous pattern of speech. A kapha person makes and saves money. Extravagances may be spending a little amount on cheese, candy and cakes. An unbalanced kapha suffers from greed, attachment, possessiveness, and laziness. All in all, the healthy kapha individual is endowed with excellent strength, knowledge, peace love, and longevity, due to a strong constitution.

As Ayurveda improves your health, there are a lot of producers claiming to sell `Ayurvedic` products. All products can be made by yourself too, as everything that you put on the body should be eatable. So you can start experimenting with making your own soap, shampoo, etc. according to the food that is beneficial for your body, dosha and (im)balance!

Food is the greatest medicine to improve your wellbeing as we build up our body from what we eat. There are loads of Ayurvedic receipes, also to treat your imbalances, just by changing your food patterns!

Ayurvedic food always has all tastes: sweet, sour, salty, spicy, bitter, and astringent.

For instance, if you have a vata (wind/air/ether) disbalance and have a very busy mind, you shouldn't eat dry or crispy food (chips / crackers / salads). To balance this disbalance, you should eat warm and comforting food such as porridge or dahl.

As you dive into Ayurveda, you will find more and more information that is helpful for you.

I wish you a happy healthy life, and let Ayurveda support you!

Might you ever consider going on a Pancha Karma, I can highly recommend Dr Vijith and his hospital in Kerala, South India; https://soulofayurveda.com/

Kindest regards,

Margriet Verhagen

Used documents:

Textbook of Ayurveda, Vasant Lad, M.A.Sc.

Ayurvedic course by Dr. Sujatha Kekada