**Ayurveda — For Optimal Health and Well-Being**

by John Douillard

It is clearly unique in this day and age to find a system of medicine that is thousands of years old and still one of the largest on the planet today. Ayurvedic medicine, although in its infancy here in America, has over 300,000 Indian doctors in the all Indian Ayurvedic Congress, making it the largest medical organization in the world. While the exact time and date of Ayurveda’s arrival in India is unclear, most Western scholars agree that its onset was somewhere between 2500 and 600 BC. Eastern scholars disagree and date Ayurvedic roots as far back as 4500 BC. The Rig Veda, which may be the oldest repository of human knowledge in the world today, recorded astrological phenomena that date maps these writings prior to 4000 BC. Throughout the Rig Veda, Ayurvedic herbs are mentioned and praised for their ability to both cure and prevent disease. While all such dating is somewhat unreliable, it is clear that Ayurveda is thousands of years old and had a developmental impact on the medical systems of Greece, Indonesia, China and Persia.

Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word derived from the root words: ayyus which means life, and veda means knowledge. Knowledge arranged systematically with logic becomes a science. Over time, Ayurveda became the science of life. It has its roots in ancient Vedic literature such as the Rig Veda and encompasses the entirety of human life — the body, mind and spirit.

The originator of the Ayurvedic system is Brahma, the Creator according to the Vedic Tradition who passed it on to the Aswini Kumars who were the physicians of the Gods who in turn imparted the knowledge to the Rishis or Seers by cognition, who in turn began teaching it to the subsequent generations via an oral tradition. The knowledge was then passed on from father to son with family secrets written on palm leaves. The amount of time from the first cognition to the time of the first textbook is unknown.

At the turn of the first millennium BC, two major Ayurvedic Treatises were written. The first and still most important is called, Charaka Samhita, which is a work primarily for physicians who are taught to diagnose and treat the body, mind and spirit of the individual. The second major writing in Ayurveda is called, Sushrut Samhita, which was the world’s first recorded and comprehensive surgical text. Sushrut also introduced the ancient practice of Marma or Vital Point Therapy which is believed to be the precursor to what is now practiced as acupuncture. These works divided Ayurveda up into eight branches that completed its comprehensive approach to health care. Today, Ayurvedic students in one of the 250 colleges and universities in India usually choose a specialty from the following eight much like medical students do in America. The eight branches are:

1. Internal Medicine or Kayachikitsa, 2. Ears, Nose and Throat or Shalaka Tantra, 3. Toxicology or Vihagra-vairadh Tantra, 4. Pediatrics or Kaumara bhritya, 5. Surgery or Shalya Tantra, 6. Psychiatry or Bhuta Vidya, 7. Aphrodisiacs or Vajikarana, and 8. Rejuvenation or Rasayana. Of these, Rasayana (Rejuvenation) and Vajikarana (Aphrodisiacs) deal with the preservation of health and vigor while the remaining branches primarily deal with the treatment of disease.

In addition to these eight branches, there are over 2000 medicinal herbs classified in the Indian Materia Medica which are still in use today. Ancient alchemists in the Ayurvedic tradition were extremely advanced for their time. The knowledge of how to prepare mercury, gold and other toxic metals into medicines was very sophisticated as was preparing minerals into fine ash called Bhasma which is easily absorbed into the blood stream. Many of these preparations are used for reversal of the aging process and the attainment of full spiritual potential. Charaka states, “Ayurveda is the knowledge that indicates the appropriate and inappropriate, happy or sorrowful conditions of living, what is auspicious or inauspicious for longevity, as well as the measure of life itself.” In Ayurveda, the measure of life is not determined by one’s material wealth or political power but by a simple measure of contentment and spirituality. It is clearly stated in Charaka that the main cause of disease is called “Praga Paraadh” which means the “Mistake of the intellect.” Simply put, disease ensues when the intellect makes the ultimate mistake, when it starts to think of itself — the body and mind — as separate from the Divine or God itself. This separation breeds unfulfilling patterns of behavior and belief systems that ultimately manifest as physical or emotional disease. As a result, many of the Ayurvedic therapies are focused on restoring this memory of pure consciousness in every cell of the body as well as removing the disease. The goal of an Ayurvedic prescription is beyond good health and treatment of disease, in the direction of full human physical and spiritual potential.
In Ayurvedic medicine, prevention is dictated by the unique requirements of one’s body type. Because we are unique, what we eat, how we exercise, when we sleep and even where we prefer to live can all be understood according to one’s body type. There are three basic mind-body types that combine to make ten unique mind-body types. Vata types tend to be thin, hyper metabolic, and they think and move quickly. They typically have dry skin and cold hands and feet. They do not like cold weather because they already have many of these cold, winter qualities inherent to their nature. Pitta types are competitive, hot and fiery with a medium frame. They prefer cool weather. Under some conditions they may get heartburn, skin rashes, inflammatory diseases or they just burn out. Kapha types are easygoing and hypo-metabolic. They will hold on to more weight and water and tend to develop allergies and congestion. They can become lethargic, obese and even depressed under certain conditions.

Understanding the body type of the patient is the hallmark of a preventative prescription. Such a prescription might include diet, exercise, specific herbs and seasonal cleansing techniques that are all tailored to the patient’s body type.

Ayurveda recognizes that all life, whether it be human, plant or animal, must live in harmony with nature in order to survive. Like the owner’s manual of a car speaks of maintenance schedules for its long term health, Ayurveda speaks of daily and seasonal routines called “Dina Charya” that insure maximal health and longevity. For example, birds fly south in the Winter as their survival depends on it. Leaves turn red and fall off trees in the Fall. It’s a law of nature. However, we tend to insulate ourselves from any participation in the huge changes that take place from one season to the next even though our survival depends on it. Putting on or taking off a sweater and eating the same foods 365 days a year is an out-of-balance lifestyle according to Ayurveda. In Ayurvedic medicine, prevention starts with a lifestyle that is in harmony with the changing cycles of nature.

We have made eating very complicated. There are more modern theories on eating than there are days in a month. While animals seem to balance their nutritional needs quite well without the knowledge of fats, proteins and carbohydrates, we incessantly count calories and measure grams of fat only to find out about the latest study which tells us the rules of eating have changed once again. The 3-Season Diet reflects the non-changing rules of Mother Nature as described in Ayurveda. As the seasons change and different foods and herbs are harvested, the diet according to Ayurveda is naturally adjusted.

In Winter, for example, the squirrels eat nuts, a good source of protein and fat. This is a perfect food to help combat the cold dry weather in the Winter months (Vata season). Grains which are harvested in the Fall and cooked in the Winter are also a perfect winter- or Vata-balancing food. Cooked grains provide a warm heavy nutritional base that helps us adapt to the cold of winter. In Spring, after eating all the heavy nuts and grains during the long sedentary winter, nature again provides the perfect food. Light leafy green veggies and berries are the first foods harvested in the Spring (Kapha season) and are the natural antidote for the allergy season. These naturally harvested foods of Spring are a Kapha-balancing or mucus-
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reducing diet. As the days get warmer in July and August, nature provides cooling fruits and vegetables to balance Pitta and the heat of Summer (Pitta season).

Ayurveda understands the cycles of nature and that these cycles will provide what we need. These cycles also provide a rhythm of life that is enjoyable. Unfortunately, our society has demanded that we rush, push and shove our way through life in order to get ahead. The biggest social violations of natural law revolve around our meals. We frequently race through our meals or at times skip meals. Ayurveda recommends that the main meal should be eaten at mid-day and this meal should be eaten slowly and calmly much like the original American diet a hundred years ago. Crashing through our day, racing through lunch and coming home to eat the biggest meal of the day at 7pm when the digestion and metabolism are winding down could not be more against the powerful grain of Mother Nature. Living in harmony with nature’s cycles is a basic principle of Ayurveda and one that is still practiced today in many traditional cultures.

Ayurveda has defined health as the equilibrium of the three biological units: Doshas which include Vata, Pitta and Kapha, Dhatus which are the seven bodily tissues including lymph, blood, muscle, fat, bone, nervous tissue and reproduction tissue, and a state of pleasure and happiness of the Soul, Senses and Mind. If any of these biological units become imbalanced, toxic metabolic by-products called “ama” will begin to accumulate in one of these biological units and start the disease process. The first stage of disease is the Stage of Accumulation or Sanchaya. The second stage is called, Prakopa or the Stage of Provocation where ama begins to aggravate the affected tissue. The third stage is called, Prasara or the Stage of Spreading where the ama begins to become systemic. The fourth stage is called, Sthana Sanshrey or the Stage of Localization where the final disease site is chosen. The fifth stage is called Disease Manifestation or Vyakti and the sixth and final stage of disease is called Bheda or the Stage of Complications or Chronicity where the ama seats deep into the affected disease site.6

Six Stages of Disease

Unlike a Western diagnosis, an Ayurvedic diagnosis begins by asking not what is the disease of the individual but rather who is the individual who has the disease. It is not uncommon in Ayurveda for example, to treat five people with insomnia with five different herbs rather than the one classic pill for insomnia. The treatments are aimed at the cause of the condition in that particular individual rather than a “one treatment fits all approach.” For this to work, a different set of diagnostic tools equip the Ayurvedic doctor.

The Ayurvedic diagnosis starts with a thorough physical exam including inspection and palpation. This starts with an examination of all the seven tissues and skin, the “Nine Doors” (two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, mouth and throat, anus and penis or vulva) are inspected and evaluated along with their secretions.7 A detailed examination of the tongue is a measure of the digestive state. Interrogation is used to determine timing of symptoms with reference to daily and seasonal cycles. Histories are taken and breath, heart and joint sounds are evaluated. Pulse diagnosis is one of the more common forms of Ayurvedic diagnosis. Some doctors prefer to diagnose only the pulse and ask no questions of the patient before they begin their treatments. I was fortunate to learn a very simple and learnable form of...
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pulse reading during my training in India. It is a simple process of determining the balance of the three doshas, Vata, Pitta and Kapha, and the ten sub-doshas. It is understood that if these three are in balance, the body will maintain a state of optimal health. The therapies are therefore aimed at restoring this balance rather than eradicating the disease. Much faith is put on the body’s ability to heal itself, a sentiment shared by one of the world’s more famous philosophers, Cabaret Voltaire who said, “The art of medicine consists of amusing the patient while Nature cures the disease.”

While the treatments in Ayurveda are targeted at removing the cause of disease, the Ayurvedic arsenal of therapeutic modalities are numerous. Many of today’s alternative therapies clearly had their roots in Ayurveda. Aromatherapy, Yoga therapy, Herbology, Sound and Color Therapies, Detoxification Therapies, Acupuncture, Exercise, Meditation, Breathing Techniques and Lifestyle Modifications were all practiced thousands of years ago as a part of the Ayurvedic tradition. With the emphasis on removing the cause of disease, Ayurvedic doctors make many dietary and lifestyle changes as a means to remove habitual and causative factors. Once these changes have been made then the doctor will typically prescribe a series of herbal treatments for the patient. The prescription can be as simple as one ground herb to a blend of 50 herbs. Or the Ayurvedic doctor may prescribe herbal compounds that can take days or weeks to prepare. Because of the sophisticated nature of most Ayurvedic preparations, the herbs perform clinically at a very high level without needing extreme or mega dosages. If the patient has been living a toxic and non-spiritual lifestyle, we may prescribe a series of cleansing or purification techniques called Panchakarma, which means five actions of cleansing.” These five actions include: Vamana or emesis therapy which removes mucus from the stomach, Virechana or purgation therapy where the liver, gall bladder and skin are cleansed, Basti or enema which flushes the intestines, Blood letting to clean the blood, and medicated Nasya or nasal oil inhalation.

Panchakarma can last for a week and up to two or three months. It is also prescribed as a primary tool for rejuvenation and longevity. If life is extended, then more time is available to merge with the Divine which is an important part of the Indian culture. While in India, the practice of Ayurveda is very connected with the religion of Hinduism, I find that most of the practices translate very well in the west without any religious implications. The Ayurveda of the West offers a more universal approach to health care with a set of therapeutic tools that understands and treats the relationship between body, mind and spirit with great effectiveness. In these changing times, we just may find that yesterday’s medicine may be opening the doors today, for the enlightened doctors of tomorrow.
In Ayurveda, exercise is not only about losing weight, winning races and staying healthy. Exercise provides a kind of physical stress that can be used to teach us how to deal with all kinds of stress (mental, emotional and social) with an internal sense of composure. In Body, Mind and Sport, I have integrated a specific nasal breathing technique I call “Darth Vader Breathing” into exercise. Darth Vader breathing (Ujjayi Pranayama as it is called in Ayurveda) allows a deep sense of calm to co-exist with exercise, making it an enjoyable experience rather than a “workout.” Billie Jean King recently told me that she has not enjoyed exercise this much since she was a child. I have used this technique with world class athletes like Martina Navratilova, with elderly people who want safe and enjoyable exercise, and as a therapy for people who have difficulty handling stress. Simply breathing deeply through the nose while walking fast for 20 minutes can teach you to handle stressful situations. (And here’s a tip: while walking fast, if you have to breathe through your mouth, you are walking too fast!) With 80% of all disease related to stress, learning how to take an experience of calm into dynamic activity is an integral part of prevention and cure. The ability to know exactly how much exercise is good for you and how much is harmful becomes more automatic as you learn to listen to your body. Breathing Ayurvedically during exercise provides numerous health benefits including a natural experience of calm that can stay with you all day long.

References

About the Author

Dr John Douillard is the author of The 3-Season Diet and Body, Mind and Sport, which sold over 60,000 copies and has been printed in six languages. His newest book, Perfect Health for Kids, was just released (© 2004, North Atlantic Books) and will be followed by Volume 1 of The Encyclopedia of Ayurvedic Massage in spring of 2004. Dr Douillard received his Ayurvedic training in India and holds a PhD in Ayurvedic medicine from the Open International University. He is the former Director of Player Development for the New Jersey Nets in the NBA. He co-directed Deepak Chopra’s Ayurvedic center for eight years and has certified over 2000 Western doctors in Ayurvedic medicine. He launched a preservative-free Ayurvedic skincare line in 1998, and an Ayurvedic herbal line for health professionals in 2003. He has been teaching Ayurveda internationally for 16 years and specializes in pulse diagnosis, Ayurvedic fitness and panchakarma. Currently he practices Ayurvedic and chiropractic medicine at his LifeSpa in Boulder, Colorado, where he lives with his wife and six children.