

# ***The Diseases of Modern Life and the Ayurvedic Approach***

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‘Pay particular attention to your health, but too much coddling of the body will, on the contrary, also spoil the health. If there is not the strength of knowledge, nobody would care twopence for your ringing of the bell.’<sup>1</sup>

**V**ERY FEW PEOPLE CAN SAY that they know no one with any chronic disease. The karma and comfort of modern life has created societies around the world and the diseases of lifestyle. Most of these diseases today are due not to one event or mishap, but rather to decisions made long ago in our choices around food, exercise, sleep, daily routines, work, relationships, medical care, and spiritual world view.

Ayurveda is the oldest systematic thinking about health and disease created by humans. It is also part of human karma that the last century has seen humans cast the views of Ayurveda out of daily reach, relegating it to derogatory terms of being only preventive, useless, and unscientific. Thus, the wisdom of Ayurveda is practised by very few people in its authentic form, using it for curing disease, promoting healthy longevity, and enhancing wisdom.

Ayurveda is a world view that advocates human allegiance and surrender to the forces of Nature that are described partially in modern physics, chemistry, and biology. As these forces, described in encoded form in the Vedas and advocated by the Hindu world view, are uncovered slowly by the modern sciences, society is newly discovering science that in fact was already

described but only for those who had the maturity to decipher the magic of the truth. Ayurveda simply states these truths in typical sutra form; those who ponder on each sutra may unravel the message encoded quietly in the terms, much as DNA is coiled and supercoiled, and when fully opened, has revealed the blueprint of life.

## ***Evidence-Based Ayurveda***

The problem with Ayurveda today is not the science itself nor the theories or knowledge of healing according to Ayurveda. The science itself is quite sound and can be demonstrated through observation of humans using it properly under the guidance of a knowledgeable person. The problem lies with the common human understanding of it, access to it mentally and practically, and how to apply it to human lives, which are riddled with habits of the westernised, urban, modern, industrialised lifestyle.

Medical sciences have ‘discovered’ and unravelled clues about the body, health, and disease, grounding the ciphered truths that remain wrapped in Ayurvedic verses. The findings of modern biomedical sciences substantiate with biochemical or radiological reasoning why certain Ayurvedic prescriptions were made for certain diseases.

## ***The Human Microbiome***

An ecosystem of microbes—bacteria, fungi, viruses, and one-celled organisms—coexist on

and in the human body. Long thought to be sterile, the gut is now known to harbour a hundred trillion of the body's nine hundred trillion organisms. The human body itself has one hundred trillion cells, one-tenth the number of microbes it hosts. Each individual has a different collection of organisms, called a microbiome, and they change with diet, environment, diseases, and

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hygiene. In fact, the organisms growing on the left hand differ from those growing on the right hand. The lungs of two people living in the same home have different organisms. These organisms start to inhabit the body when the foetus makes its way into the world through the birth canal, then suckles its mother's breast.

What is the purpose of these microbes? They make vitamins that the body cannot, especially B vitamins and K vitamins. They have enzymes that the human body does not have, and therefore break down compounds we eat that we cannot otherwise digest. They signal our immune system to make signals crucial to the development of our defence system. They salvage carbohydrates that would otherwise waste some of the plants we eat. They produce some of the precursors of healthy fats, short-chain fatty acids—SCFA, that our body requires in order to prevent 'bad fats' from accumulating in our system. They produce antibiotics that we cannot make, thereby preventing disease bugs from infesting our body.

The idea of food being defiled because someone has partly eaten it, popular in Indian culture, makes sense when we think about the microbiome. Attention to contamination of our

ecosystem and its bugs with another person's ecosystem could result in imbalance. It is one reason that Ayurveda and common Hindu culture advocates hygiene, not sharing utensils, and inner clothing. The seventh chapter of the Ayurvedic text *Madhava Nidana* discusses in detail the twenty types and four origins of these microbial organisms, some of which were native in the gut. It also discusses worms and other parasites. Ayurveda also discusses the concept of *satmya*, a person's individualised approach to health and wellness based on what she or he grew up eating, thinking, and breathing, and thus the balance that the person maintained with those foods, temperatures, and behaviour. A specific microbiome correlates highly with this personalised and individualised approach to treatment planning and is one of the reasons why the same treatment cannot work successfully for two people with the same disease symptoms.

### **The Power of Intention**

In the 1990s, a series of experiments done in New Jersey explored the power of the mind to convert energy into matter, pushing the ideas of post-modern physics. The now-famous PEAR experiments, of the Princeton Experimental Anomalies Research team, examined the ability of participants to imagine in their minds and convert a series of random number generators to create non-random numbers. They also calculated matter in black boxes, applied concentrated focus and power of the mind, and found changes in the quantity of matter. These are widely rejected by people who cannot reconcile the power of the mind to manifest intention into actual matter.

However, there continue to be experiments. In the 1970s experiments were done in the cardiac care unit, with non-relatives praying for patients. Termed accessory prayer, the intervention was shown repeatedly to positively affect

the outcome and patients' health compared to another blinded, randomly-assigned group for which no prayer had been done. Dr Larry Dossey has collected these experiments and pontificated over their significance, concluding that non-local prayer and mindful intention can affect the subjects of our intention. Business coaches guide people to develop their abilities to move projects forward, create wealth through intention, and shift conditioned behaviour. Ayurveda absolutely advocates the training of the mind to create what we want in our lives.

### **Food as Medicine**

Mainstream legitimate medicine, also called Allopathy or biomedicine, has long stated that diets do not impact the body significantly and are not curative, and therefore cannot be considered medicine. Until the past decade, physicians could be de-licensed for using foods and nutrition as their primary medicine. However, the past several years have shown that foods impact our gut and our microbiome; foods impact our development of cardiovascular disease; foods impact our development of obesity, which is one of the main risk factors for many chronic diseases. Ayurveda advocates the how, when, and what of food as a key pillar of health and intervention of diseases.

### **Inner Pharmacology**

While many modern scientists are committed to the idea that a placebo is equivalent to nonsensical or non-therapeutic interventions, what this means is that the power of the mind to create changes is the actual mechanism of placebo. Ayurveda does not discount the power of the mind. In the absence of or despite the presence of an external drug, the mind's inner pharmacy dispenses an array of hormones, antibiotics, neurotransmitters, and everything the

body needs when it is healthy. Keeping the inner pharmacist in tune with the body is the challenge. Creating the ability to connect the conscious mind with the inner pharmacist is the work of yoga. This has been proven many times by watching the abilities of yogis. A successful yogi may have control over her or his autonomic nervous system, physiology, breath, and other functions considered uncontrollable. Ayurveda seeks to empower the inner pharmacy by maintaining harmonious currents of thought, action, and communication between the mind, body, senses and soul. Such inner harmony creates a clean space for the gradual opening of the mind to control the body.

### **Chemistry and Metals**

Since World War II, the mainstream world has convinced the public that heavy metals are dangerous, because they are toxic. People have come to blame complex diseases on heavy metal poisoning, completely dismissing the knowledge that metals were purified and bound to herbs and incinerated to produce small particles that could be absorbed easily and safely by the body. These *bhasmas* would penetrate into those sites where cancer cells grew and hidden infections flourished rampantly, and would kill the fast growing cells. The metals were then carefully chelated out of the body using a series of purifying and rejuvenating steps tailored to the fire, strength, and constitution of the patient. If the step was done with the guidance of an Ayurvedic expert, the metal could be brought out of the body safely and easily, supported by diet, exercise, sleep, and proper supportive medicines. Ayurvedic *bhasmas* are still widely in use to the tune of lakhs of doses per year, as they are very effective when prescribed and guided by Ayurvedic physicians, who are competent in their use. Most of the side effects occur from improper medicine makers and incompetent medicine prescribers.

### Epigenomics

Decades after the DNA was discovered, the machinery used to regulate and read the DNA came under investigation. Over the past fifty years, it has been discovered that there are more components to the genetic story. RNA and protein, which are written in the DNA code, have a multitude of functions, one of which is to open and close the DNA strands. Modern molecular biology has revealed that chemicals that enter into our body can make their way to the DNA to affect how it is read. Foods, environmental toxins, poisons, medicinal molecules, and cellular signals can and do affect the DNA structure and function. People, who change from their ancestral diet, have now been shown to change the way their DNA is read, or expressed. The science of these expressions on top of—epi—the message of the DNA—genome—is called Epigenomics, and this research is revealing the powerful role of processed foods, heavy metals, nanoparticles, and cancer promoters.

### The Doshic World

Ayurveda suggests to us that if we live with the ebbs and flows of nature, and better understand the direct relationship between our health and the flows of our activities, we can get a greater understanding and begin more competent self-care.

The three principles of Doshic philosophy ground the relationship of the world as a constant movement between energy and matter. The principle of all that flows as gas is called *Vata*, with qualities similar to air and ether: cold, dry, light, mobile, and rough. Everything in our body and our environment that flows is influenced by *Vata*, which in fact is most things. *Vata* is the initiator and the instigator, the beginner of processes.

The principle of all that transforms is called

*Pitta*, with qualities similar to fire and water: sharp, fiery, acidic, and flowing. Everything in our body and our environment that is transformed is influenced by *Pitta*, including our enzymes, our digestion, our interpretation of information that comes into our being—such as light, other beings, sound, thoughts. The principle of all that flows as liquid is called *Kapha*, with qualities similar to water and earth: stable, cool, heavy, and grounding. Everything in our body and our environment that is grounding, lubricating, and sustaining in the material form is influenced by *Kapha*.

According to Ayurveda, the loss of the complete, unbounded vitality that is *Ojas*, is described by the disease complex of *Prameha*, an increase in urination that foreshadows the development of chronic diseases such as diabetes mellitus, obesity, and problems with the cardiovascular system. In modern medicine, these are sometimes called metabolic syndrome.

Diseases due to our choices and our lack of courage to take control of our power to choose lie at the heart of many conditions called ‘Lifestyle Diseases’. These ailments are often associated with the modern, urban, westernised way of living, though many of them existed in the ancient days when Ayurveda was captured into the classic texts of Ayurvedic medicine, beginning around 500 BCE. These conditions include cardiovascular diseases, chronic fatigue, arthritis, chronic migraine, low back pain, constipation, irritable bowel syndrome, hypothyroid, diabetes, psoriasis, eczema, dry eyes, hyperacidity, ulcers, uterine fibroids, and varicose veins. In fact, many of these diseases are conditions in which chronic inflammation in the body creates pain, breakdown of tissues, and an imbalance between the hormones and signals of the body.

Unlike any other system of medicine, Ayurveda describes the beginnings of lifestyle diseases

in great detail and has a unique and accurate ability to prognosticate or predict what can happen to a person if these etiologic factors continue and the mind remains unbridled.

The sign of vigour, the sign of life, the sign of hope, the sign of health, the sign of everything that is good, is strength. As long as the body lives, there must be strength in the body, strength in the mind, [and strength] in the hand (6.62).

### **Svastha Vritta I: Attitude is Foremost**

The first factor described in Ayurveda for the pursuit of health and cure from disease is the mind. Factors that lead to mental worries, grief, and discontentment are the first step down the slippery slope of disease. In the *Charaka Samhita*, the acharyas focus on factors that promote longevity, strength, nourishment, delight, and happiness.<sup>2</sup> The first step is control of the mind and a conscious awareness of what a person allows into her or his environment or actively takes into her or his being.

Attitude is the first principle that is required for cultivating the knowledge, practices, and behaviour that will promote health. Choosing to have a positive attitude in all situations is a learned behaviour from our parents, schooling, environment, and various teachers. Fatalist or negative attitudes do not promote health. Trusting that each of us has a place in the universe helps us to belong. You must know that the flow of the universe includes *you* as a variable in the almost infinite equation of variables, and that your best efforts and positive attitude will attract good things into your life. This is called the power of intention in the modern day, and it has been used by yogis to create and manifest all that is needed in the form of matter from energy.

Non-violence is the foremost promoter of longevity of life. The attitude of non-violence is

more than an outward lack of violence and passivity. It also includes an active attitude of promoting harmony in the world. It asks the mind not to engage in the foes of worry, anxiety, hatred, resentment, fear, lust, gluttony, and over-indulgence in passions which lead to addictive desires that beget violence. Examples are numer-

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ous, and can be found if we analyse the causes of most wars on the planet.

The greatest promoter of strength is the concept of celibacy. In Ayurveda, celibacy encompasses prowess and fortitude from good quality tissues of the body. Foods and activities that promote *Ojas* give a strong mind, body, resilience, good immunity, and resistance to disease.

Knowledge is the great promoter of nourishment and grounding, for nourishment is not only food but the knowledge that underlies our pursuit of food. In holistic nutrition courses, nourishment is taught as fulfilment in our work, relationships, inner pursuits, a sense of spirituality, and our physical body. Food, diet, nutrition, and calories only form a part of nourishment. True knowledge promotes our awareness of what is real food for our bodies and naturally prevents us from wanting processed, dead food. True knowledge also shields our desires for unhealthy foods that lead to diseases such as obesity and inflammatory conditions in the gut, which further lead to inflammatory conditions in the body.

Self-control of the sense organs is said to be the greatest promoter of delight and the ability to be content. The discipline of yoga and the practice of spirituality, both address the yoking of the mind, with its infinite possibilities and

quick movements. The sense organs, the five senses of knowledge, interface our mind and soul with the world. Over-stimulation of the sense organs leads to addictions, uncompensated desires, and other enemies of the mind. Under-stimulation leads to withdrawal, depression, lack of connection, and hopelessness from a lack of experience. Aberrant stimulations lead to perverted thoughts that make us see the world in patterns that are not harmonious with the way Nature flows. Thus, self-control allows us to engage our hearing, touching or feeling, sight, smell, and taste to the world around us and to enjoy the balance that is Nature. This attunement to harmony gives us delight and the contentment that is often translated as happiness.

True intimacy with oneself, one's soul, mind, and body, as well as emotional trust and harmonious mental intimacy with family, friends, and teachers allows each of us to lead a harmonious life, and protects us from the imbalances that disarm us and lead to disease.

Why spend so much time on the mind when discussing lifestyle diseases? The mind controls our intake, attitude, and conditioned behaviour. When we can change these, we can change the course of our diseases. It is simple, but it is not easy for most adults.

### **Svastha Vritta II: The Practical Use of Ayurveda in Modern Life**

Lifestyle science is known as *Svastha Vritta* in the discipline of Ayurveda, to ground oneself, *sva-stha*, in correctness, *vritta*. After the foundation of a good mind-body connection is laid, the pillars of good preventive health are cast. The main components include understanding and counselling of proper sleep, self-control, food, rest, and medicines.

Many guidelines are given by Ayurveda, but the observable truth is that most of today's

Ayurvedic physicians in India do not practise the guidelines in their own lives. Therefore, patients find it difficult to accept what they are told. Ayurveda requires us to 'walk the talk'. Furthermore, many Ayurvedic physicians do not explain how to make their guidelines practical and usable in today's world, where money and time are always in shortage. How do we make them practical in this urbanising, modern, Western world?

Things that mark the modern world—money, commerce, materialism, superficial relationships, cellular phones, internet, television, electronics, technology, artificial and processed foods—make it difficult for us to simplify our lives. In fact, society would prefer that we do not have simple lives, as the rules of commerce and profit require us to psychologically favour those industrialised, comfort-centric ideals. In protest, spiritually-evolving people in the West have begun a movement toward a simple, less material life. The tiny house movement is a group of people who consciously choose to live in smaller houses, with fewer possessions that are more functional towards their goals in life, with a greater emphasis on *doing* and *being* and less on *having*.

Ayurveda teaches us that to preserve health, we must reconnect with the balance of Nature. To do this while living in the modern world, there are a few practical guidelines for curing lifestyle diseases. Known broadly as *Vihara*, they involve the knowledge, attitudes, and practices that we call our lifestyle. They revolve around food, exercise, sleep, daily routine, work, time, relationships, medical care, and having a spiritual world view.

(To be concluded)

### **References**

1. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1–8, 1989; 9, 1997), 8.416–7.
2. See *Charaka Sambhita*, Sutra Sthana, 30.13–5.