

Ayurveda: The Ancient Hindu Science of Health and Medicine

Some time ago, around the fifth century AD, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Fa Hsien visited the city of Pataliputra. It was here, in this ancient northern Indian city, that he discovered an organized system of medical provisions that eventually became known as Ayurveda (Wujastyk 2). Ayurveda, which literally means “the knowledge of science for longevity” is said to have materialized at the beginning of time when life itself was created. It is therefore thought to have no concrete beginning and will thus continue until the end of creation (Sharma 719). Ayurveda is an all encompassing system of medical practices that includes both preventative and prescriptive measures, advice on exercise, diet, morality as well as specific medical teachings for the professional physician, focusing on aspects of diagnosis and therapy (Wujastyk 3). There are two Ayurvedic classics, the *Carakasamhita* and Susruta’s *Compendium*. Both of these texts describe diagnoses, pharmaceuticals, human body and treatment among other things, however, the *Carakasamhita* is the text in which the roots of Indian medicine originate (Wujastyk 31). These texts, as well as Ayurveda’s other teachings and doctrines, suggest that this could have been the world’s first organized medical system and have thus laid the foundation for the medical procedures that are practiced today.

Ayurveda’s exact roots are difficult to trace as its practices go back to prehistory around the time when people started to become conscious of their health and became aware that they had to take measures to improve and preserve their lives (Sharma 719). While it is hard to set a concrete time when actual Ayurvedic practices came about, by the time of the Indus Valley Civilization, Ayurveda was well developed and the attitude of people towards health practices was advanced (Sharma 719). The ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo-daro were intricately planned to include drainage systems, public wells and waste removal structures indicating their

appreciation of proper sanitation (Sharma 720). Excavations of these cities found stag-horn and cuttlefish bone suggesting that vegetables, animals and minerals were used as sources for drugs (Sharma 720). The ash of Stag-horn and the cuttlefish bone were useful in treating cardiac pain, respiratory disorders and diseases of the ear and, interestingly, many of these ancient remedies are still used today (Sharma 720). In addition to the use of certain drugs, Indus peoples placed great emphasis on personal hygiene and cosmetics use including the use of collyrium for preventing and curing eye diseases (Wujastyk 184). With their intricate techniques and insightful knowledge into therapeutics, the Indus Valley Civilization played a vital role in the development of Ayurveda.

Today, Ayurveda is a living system of medicine in India. In 1970, the Indian Parliament set up a Central Council for Ayurveda recognizing its integral role in Indian Medicine (Wujastyk 9). This council provides accredited colleges, standardized qualifications and professional training in Ayurveda. By 1983, there were approximately 100 accredited Ayurvedic training colleges in India (Wujastyk 9). It is clear that the ancient practice of Ayurveda continues to prevail in the medicinal practices of today.

The treatments, practices and therapies of Ayurveda revolve around a central concept: the body. The *pancha-bhuta* theory asserts living creatures are formed from the five forms of matter: earth, fire, wind, water and *akasa* and therefore the body is in a perpetual state of flux just as nature is (Kakar, 231). The central process of the body is digestion and is seen as “cooking” and known as “fire in the belly” (Kakar 232). When food enters the belly it is cooked by the digestive fire and turns into the first of several body tissues quickly becoming flesh and eventually reaching the highest bodily essence: semen [Ayurveda does not seem to provide an obvious equivalent in women to semen and the evolution of body tissues does not seem to fit the women’s body (Wujastyk

5)] (Wujastyk 5). Networks of tubes carry the fluids of the body from place to place, and interestingly, blockage of these tubes is vital in Ayurveda's explanation of insanity (Wujastyk 6).

In keeping the bodily elements in balance, the consumption of environmental matter in the right form, proportion and combination must be taken into consideration (Kakar 231). Therefore, diet is essential to Ayurveda emphasizing that any food used for medicinal purposes should be avoided to maintain physical well being (Kakar 231). A pure, bland diet is recommended, emphasizing Ayurveda's belief in the mutual relationship between food and the "mind" (Kakar 269). Different foods are believed to have different qualities that each affected the body in a variety of ways. It was believed that sour foods increased promiscuity while red chilies and pepper activated a person's urge to dominate others; even water at different temperatures had diverse effects (Govindan 23). Certain types of mind prefer certain types of food and therefore, one of the first questions that a physician asked their patient pertained to what foods the individual had consumed (Kakar 269)

The *Carakasamhita*, or "Caraka's *Compendium*", is the text in which classical Indian medicine really begins and the text that sheds the light on real medical practices (Wujastyk 39). The present-day *Carakasamhita*, the oldest Samhita of Ayurveda available today, was not the work of a single author but has three distinct authors: Atreya-Agnivesa in the pre-Buddhist period (1000BC), Caraka in the post-Buddhist period (2-3rd century BC) and Drdhabala in the classical period (4-5th century AD) (Sharma 728). The compendium consists of 120 chapters divided into eight parts: Sutra – on pharmacology, food, diet, etc.; Nidana – on causes of eight diseases; Vimana – topics such as taste and nourishment; Sarira – on philosophy, anatomy and embryology; Indriya – on diagnosis and prognosis; Cikitsa – on therapy; Kalpa – on pharmacy and Siddhi – on further general therapy (Wujastyk 41). Included in the Vimana section is a

chapter on epidemics. Mosquitoes, rats, earthquakes and bad water are all recognized as possible causes of epidemics highlighting the exceptional thinking of these people in recognizing disease vectors and carriers. In addition, the chapter reflects on the classification of diseased patients into three categories: those who can be cured, those who cannot be cured but can be improved and those who are incurable (Wujastyk 49). The *Carakasamhita* recommends that physicians do not get involved with patients of the incurable type. Natural urges are highlighted in another chapter of the *Carakasamhita*. This chapter emphasizes the urges which should be suppressed and those that should not (Wujastyk 53). It was stated that a wise man was not to suppress the urges of urine or feces, sneezing, yawning or the urging of hunger and thirst. However, the urges of fury, pride, envy and excessive passion should be suppressed (Wujastyk 54). The *Carakasamhita* highlights many vital aspects of Ayurveda and plays an important role in the interpretation of Ayurvedic theory.

Similar to Caraka's *Compendium*, Susruta's *Compendium* also consists of sections relating to Ayurvedic practices (Larson 108). One section, Nidana, highlights surgery. While Caraka goes into brief descriptions, Susruta goes into great detail about all aspects of surgery (Wujastyk 106). It emphasizes that a good surgeon will be one who has witnessed operations and developed practical experience. He should be clean, keep his nails and hair short and dress in a white garment (Wujastyk 130). Knives, integral parts of surgeon's equipment, are also discussed and include: types, sizes, proper handling and sharpening techniques (Wujastyk 124). Also included is how a surgeon must be able to diagnose the ailments by either the five senses or interrogation and, after this, how he is to treat the problem through various surgical techniques included in the *Compendium* (Wujastyk 131).

In addition to surgery, some of the most fundamental components of Ayurveda treatments are the use of drugs. Physicians had to be well acquainted with the identification of drugs as well as their properties and actions (Sharma 722). Drugs were used by external application, internal administration and, as well, the use of natural remedies such as sun-rays, fire, water and air were recognized as having important therapeutic qualities (Sharma 722). Essential components of drugs were plants as they were often a main source of which drugs came from. The *osadhi-sukta* of the *Rg Veda* is a document on the knowledge about plants in that age with soma being recognized as the king of herbs (Sharma 724). Some of the plants were cultivated while others grew in the wild (Sharma 724). Sometimes, herbs were combined for medicinal purposes and since a physician was to have complete knowledge of the plants, when administered, desired results were often observed (Sharma 724).

Ayurveda encompasses many different aspects of Indian medicine and is widely regarded as the world's first organized medical system (Wujastyk 5). Both the *Carakasamhita* and the *Susrutasutra* are integral in the interpretation of Ayurvedic theory and provide insight into the forward thinking of the people of this time (Larson 108). They also provided a trustworthy reference for teachings in Ayurveda which furthered the development of the medical system and preservation of both the mind and body (Wujastyk 31). As well, they formed a basis in which many therapies originate today. While the body, drugs, surgeons and classics have all been discussed, Ayurveda includes many more essential components that have not been included here. However, all of Ayurveda's components are equally important; these are just the ones I have chosen to highlight. With its intricate techniques, exceptional treatments and brilliant procedures, Ayurveda has undoubtedly played an enormous role in ancient medical practices as well as in laying the foundation for the medical practices seen today.

References and Further Recommended Readings

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