

Understanding Health: The Ayurvedic Mind-Body Method



A meeting of the
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Exploring the Hindu system of healing. As seen in the Bhagavad Gita, everything in the Universe is a combination of the three gunas or qualities, the balance of which leads to health or disease.

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Disclaimer: please note this handout does not claim to be a full exposition on the topic of Ayurveda but is only a brief incomplete introduction for the purpose of our meeting. It focuses on some of the metaphysics on which the system of Ayurveda rests and outlines some of its fundamental principles as a matter of illustration.

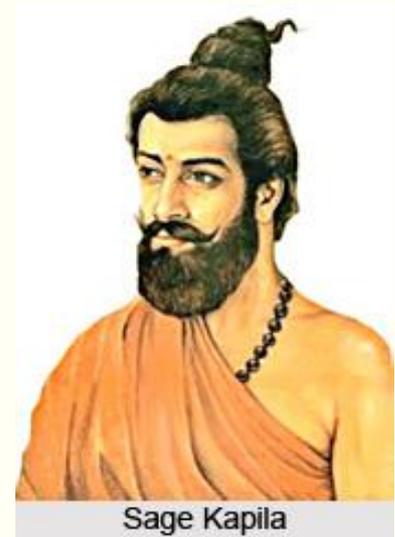
Introduction to the Ancient healing art of Ayurveda

Ayur Veda (Sk.). Lit., “the Veda of Life”, (Theos. Glossary, H. P. Blavatsky) or Science of life. In contrast with allopathic medicine and the modern scientific approach, Ayurveda is not dissociated from religion and philosophy, allowing a holistic approach to health which is often missing in our modern medicine. Its philosophy is not incompatible with modern medicine and actually complements it effectively, because of the very rational emphasis of Ayurveda.

“Ayurveda is concerned with eight principle branches of medicine: paediatrics, gynaecology, obstetrics, ophthalmology, geriatrics, otolaryngology (ear, nose, and throat), general medicine, and surgery. Each of these medical specialities is addressed according to theories of the five elements (Ether, Air, Fire, Water, Earth): the tridosha, or three bodily humors: the seven dhatus, or body tissues; three malas (urine, stools, sweat); and the trinity of life: body, mind and spiritual awareness.” (Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad) These concepts will be expanded further on.

Ayurvedic tradition is rooted in the Sankhya School of philosophy, yet is closely connected to other schools too in particular Yoga and Vedanta, and therefore has to be studied in this context if one aspires to become thoroughly acquainted with this system.

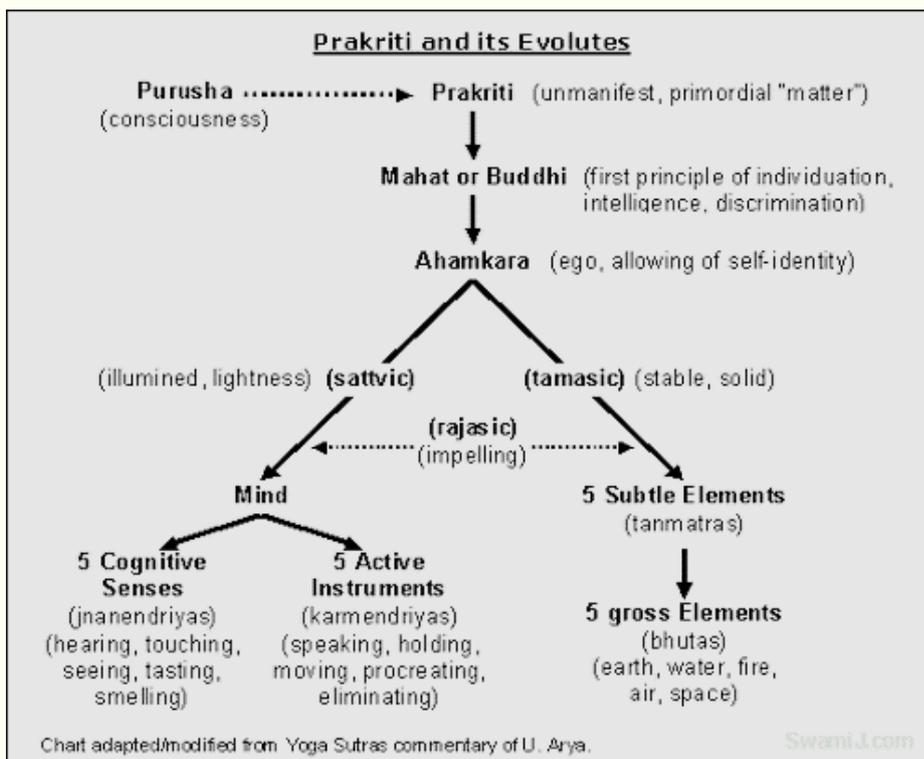
Sânkhya (Sk.) The system of philosophy founded by Kapila Rishi [Theos. Glossary entry: A great sage, a great adept of antiquity; the author of the Sankhya philosophy], a system of analytical metaphysics, and one of the six Darshanas or schools of philosophy [N. from the Ed. The other 5 are Yoga (founded by Patanjali), Nyaya (Rishi Gautama), Vaisheshika (Kanâda), Mimamsa (Jamini) and Vedanta (Vyasa); esoteric science being the 7th according to HPB of entry occult sciences in Theos. Glossary]. It discourses on numerical categories and the meaning of the twenty-five tatwas (the forces of nature in various degrees). This “atomistic school,” as some call it, explains nature by the interaction of twenty-four elements with purusha (spirit) modified by the three gunas (qualities), teaching the eternity of pradhâna (primordial, homogeneous matter), or the self-transformation of nature and the eternity of the human Egos. (Theos. Glossary, H. P. Blavatsky)



Sage Kapila

Some fundamentals of the Sankhya philosophy

“Ayurveda encompasses not only science but religion and philosophy as well. We use the word religion to denote beliefs and disciplines conducive toward states of being in which the doors of perception open to all aspects of life. In Ayurveda, the whole of life’s journey is considered to be sacred. The word philosophy refers to love of truth and in Ayurveda, truth is Being, Pure Existence, The Source of all life. Ayurveda is a science of truth as it is expressed in life.” (Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad)



Scheme illustrating the duality Purusha (Spirit or Consciousness)-Prakriti (primordial Matter) and the 24 tatwas (or tattvas = principles or elements of reality) arising from the latter [N of the Ed.] Purusha and Prakriti are regarded in the Sankhya school as two eternal realities; to be contrasted with the concept in the Secret Doctrine of Spirit and Matter being 2 aspects of the One reality, the Absolute (Parabrahm) (SD 1:13-17).

“The rishi Kapila, who realized the Samkhya philosophy of creation, discovered twenty-four principles or elements of the universe, of which Prakriti, or creativity, is the most basic. Purusha is the male, while Prakriti is the female energy. Purusha is formless, colourless and beyond attributes and takes no active part in the manifestation of the universe. This energy is choiceless, passive awareness. Prakriti has form, colour and attributes: it is awareness with choice. It is Divine Will, the One who desires to become many. The universe is the child born out of the womb of Prakriti, the Divine Mother. Prakriti creates all forms in the universe, while Purusha is the witness to this creation. It is primordial physical energy containing the three attributes, or gunas, found in all nature, the evolving cosmos. The three gunas are satva (essence), rajas (movement), and tamas (inertia). These three are the foundation for all existence. They are contained in balance in Prakriti. When this balance is disturbed, there is an interaction of the gunas which thus engenders the evolution of the universe. The first manifestation from Prakriti is Cosmic Intellect. From Mahat, Ego (Ahamkar) is formed. Ego then manifests into the five senses (tanmatras) and the five motor organs, with the help of satva, thus creating the organic universe. The same Ego further manifests into the five basic elements (bhutas) with the help of tamas, to create the inorganic universe.

Rajas is the active vital life force in the body which moves both the organic and inorganic universes to satva and tamas respectively. Therefore, satva and tamas are inactive, potential energies which need the active, kinetic force of rajas. Satva is creative potential (Brahma); Rajas is a kinetic protective force (Vishnu); and tamas is a potential destructive force (Mahesha or Shiva). Creation (Brahma), Protection (Vishnu), and Destruction (Mahesha or Shiva) are the three manifestations of the first cosmic soundless sound, aum, which are constantly operating in the universe.” (Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad.)

Some underlying key metaphysical concepts or why apparently separate constituents of the manifested universe such as plants for eg can affect others beings?

“Ayurveda teaches that man is a microcosm, a universe within himself. He is a child of the cosmic forces of the external environment, the macrocosm. His individual existence is indivisible from the total cosmic manifestation. Ayurveda views health and “disease” in holistic terms, taking into consideration the inherent relationship between individual and cosmic spirit, individual and cosmic consciousness, energy, and matter.” (Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad.)

In other words, there is homology between substance in the Cosmos and in Man, as in the Hermetic doctrine “as above so below”. We are a part of this universe and this universe is present in us. So what is the relevance when it comes to healing? Illnesses can come from imbalances in our environment (for e.g. extreme heat or extreme cold can make us ill), as human beings like all beings are cosmic resonators and reflect within the perturbations in the external world. However, this principle also make it possible to rebalance any excess or lack of a particular dosha, using the key principle that follows. The Ayurvedic practitioner is able to make use of the additive effect of substances that has a particular dosha to increase the lack of a particular dosha in the patient, and likewise is able to diminish the particular level of a dosha that would be in excess. This is only possible because of the universality of the 3 gunas/doshas and of the panchabhutas or 5 elements (air, fire, water, earth, space). There are correspondences which are made and listed in the Ayurvedic tradition (for eg bones correspond to the earth, digestive enzymes correspond to fire because they release energy and heat, blood and other fluids correspond to water etc.). (Adapted from Pr Valiathan’s lecture listed in the references)

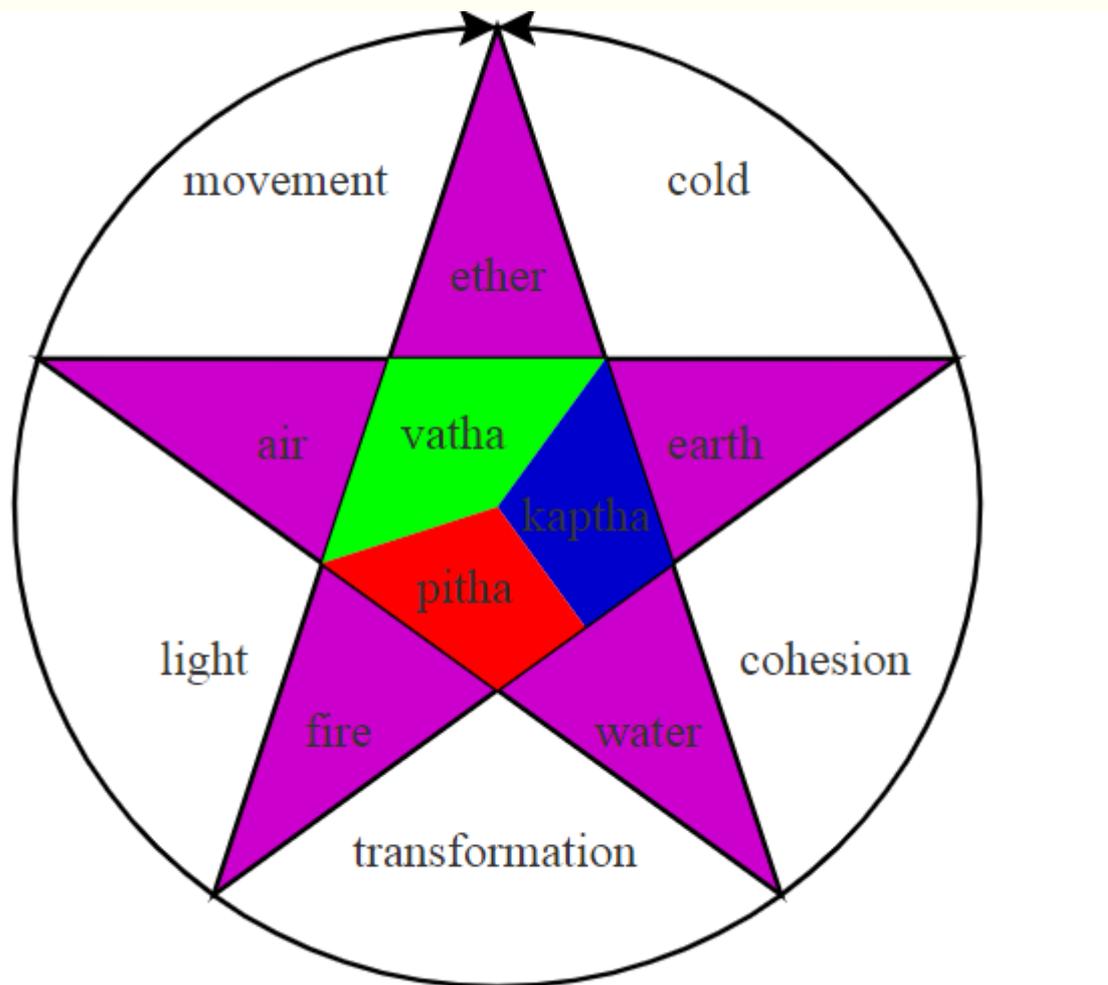
“According to the teachings of Ayurveda, every human being has four biological and spiritual instincts: religious, financial, pro-creative and the instinct toward freedom. Balanced good health is the foundation for the fulfilment of these instincts. Ayurveda helps the healthy person to

maintain health, and the diseased person to regain health. It is a medical-metaphysical healing life-science, the mother of all healing arts. The practice of Ayurveda is designed to promote human happiness, health, and creative growth.

Through studying the teachings of Ayurveda, the practical knowledge of self-healing may be acquired by anyone. By the proper balance of all energies in the body, the processes of physical deterioration and disease can be impressively reduced. This concept is basic to Ayurvedic science: the capability of the individual for self-healing.” (Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad)

Introduction to the concept of the doshas, or human constitution

“Originating in Cosmic Consciousness, this wisdom was intuitively received in the hearts of the rishis. They perceived that consciousness was energy manifested into the five basic principles, or elements: Ether (space), Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. This concept of the five elements lies at the heart of Ayurvedic science. (...) The five basic elements exist in all matter. Water provides the classic example: the solid state of water, ice, is a manifestation of the Earth principle. Latent heat (Fire) in the ice liquifies it, manifesting the Water principle: and then eventually it turns into steam, expressing the Air principle. The steam disappears into Ether, or space. Thus the five basic elements. Ether, Air, Fire, Water and Earth, are present in one substance. All five originated in the energy issuing from Cosmic Consciousness: all five are present in all matter in the universe. Thus, energy and matter are one.” (Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad)



Scheme by Krishnavedala - Own work, CC0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=25123034>

“The five basic elements manifest in the human body as three basic principles, or humors, known as the tridosha. From the Ether and Air elements, the bodily air principle called vata is manifested. (In Sanskrit terminology, this principle is called vata dosha.) The Fire and Water elements manifest together in the body as the fire principle called pitta. The Earth and Water elements manifest as the bodily water humor known as kapha.

These three elements — vata - pitta - kapha — govern all the biological, psychological and physio-pathological functions of the body, mind and consciousness. They act as basic constituents and protective barriers for the body in its normal physiological condition; when out of balance, they contribute to disease processes.

The tridosha are responsible for the arising of natural urges and for individual preferences in foods: their flavours, temperatures, and so on. They govern the creation, maintenance, and destruction of bodily tissue, and the elimination of waste products from the body. They are also responsible for psychological phenomena, including such emotions as fear, anger, and greed: and for the highest order of human emotions such as understanding, compassion, and love. Thus, the tridosha are the foundation of the psychosomatic existence of man. In general, there are seven types of constitutions: (1) vata, (2) pitta, (3) kapha, (4) vata-pitta, (5) pitta-kapha, (6) vata-kapha and (7) vata-pitta-kapha. Among these seven general types, there are innumerable subtle variations that depend upon the percentage of vata-pitta-kapha elements in the constitution (...)

According to Ayurveda, the first requirement for healing oneself and others is a clear understanding of the three dosha, the concept of vata-pitta-kapha is unique to Ayurveda, and it holds the potential for revolutionizing the healing systems of the West. However, the concept of the three principles and the Sanskrit words, vata-pitta-kapha, are very difficult to translate into Western terms. Vata is a principle of movement. That which moves is called vata. (...)

A balance among the tridosha is necessary for health. For example, the air principle kindles the bodily fire, but water is necessary to control fire, otherwise the bodily fire would burn the tissues. Vata moves kapha and pitta, since kapha and pitta are immobile.

The determination of the constitution or dosha of the patient by thorough examination and questioning guides the Ayurvedic practitioner into advising the patient as to which foods to avoid and to encourage, fasting, as well as other therapeutic practices that will tend to rebalance the doshas of the patient. Amongst those therapeutic practices, the following five are classed as basic processes: vomiting; purgatives or laxatives; medicated enemas (injection of fluid into the lower bowel by way of the rectum); nasal administration of medication and purification of the blood.” (Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad)

The place given to right living in Ayurveda

Importance of right living is stressed and the following virtues are encouraged to be practised. Truthfulness, forgiveness, compassion (karuna), equanimity, dedicated work with indifference to results are examples of these perennial values. Also worth noting, cultivating the ability to see oneself in others, which when pursued with assiduity, would render one incapable of harming others. (Ref Pr Valiathan lecture) This is linked to the cardinal concept in Theosophy of the realisation of the Self and the notion of unity, to cultivate at the expense of the illusion of separateness.

Concluding: it's not over till the Lord sings (Bhagavad Gita, or the Lord's Song)

The Bhagavad Gita does provide some insight into the ideal path of self perfection and Self knowledge humanity is progressing towards, helped on by the Law of Karma and how to speed up this process which brings harmony for oneself and for others. Its pure message if studied and perceived with the right buddhic intuition goes beyond the exoteric message of the generic Ayurveda and provides sustainable keys for a life more in harmony with the Laws of Nature that our the laws of our inner Being.

Krishna, in Ch XIII (Devotion by means of Separation from the Three Qualities) explains that sublime spiritual knowledge which has enabled all Sages to attain to ultimate perfection. He states:

"The great Brahma (Brahma is to be taken as prakriti or nature) is my womb in which I place the seed; from that...is the production of all existing things. This great Brahma is the womb for all those various forms which are produced from any womb, and I am the Father who provideth the seed" (Gita 100)

All forms and the three great qualities produced from that womb are:

- Sattva: light or truth. It entwineth the soul through lucidity, peacefulness, happiness, attachment to knowledge and that which is pleasant. When wisdom is evident in a man, this quality prevails. It produces, as Karma, the fruit of righteous acts. Such persons, in whom it shines, achieve renown.
- Rajas: passion or desire. It is of the nature of desire and produces thirst and propensity, and it is action and the consequences produced from action. This quality is marked by the love of gain, activity and the initiating of works. Its karmic fruit of its working is gathered in pain. Those who manifest this quality remain in the middle sphere of works.
- Tamas: indifference or darkness. It surrounds the power of judgment with indifference, and deludes all creatures, imprisoning the Ego in a body through idleness, folly, sleep, and heedlessness. It is marked by absence of illumination. Its karmic fruit is marked by ignorance, delusion and folly. Those afflicted with this gloomy quality sink into obscurity.

(See W. Q. Judge's Letters That Have Helped Me, 27; Gita 101-3, 115-8)

All faith says Krishna in Ch XVII (Devotion as regards the Three Kinds of Faith), proceeds from sattva, and depends on a man's innate, spiritual nature. (Gita 115)

Sattva quality faith is marked by worship of the gods. Food that is sattvic is pleasing and healthy, increasing vigor and strength, of permanent benefit and congenial. Sacrifice, directed by Scripture, performed by those who expect no reward, but are convinced they are necessary is of the quality of light and goodness. Control of body, speech and mind among those who are sattvic is marked by honor paid to the gods and Wise; by purity, rectitude, chastity, harmlessness; gentle speech, truthful and friendly; regular study, serenity of mind, mildness of temper, silence, self-restraint, and absolute straightforwardness in conduct. Gifts bestowed at the right time and to the proper person, by one who has no hope for a reward are Sattvic.

Rajas quality faith is marked by a worship of the celestial powers, the Yakshas and Rakshasas. Rajasic foods are those that are over bitter, too acid, excessively salty, hot, dry and burning, and which cause unpleasantness, pain and disease. Sacrifice that is performed in the hope of a return, or as ostentation of piety, is passionate and Rajasic. Actions performed out of hypocrisy, to obtain

the respect of others, for fame or favour, and belonging to the ordinary world, are Rajasic. Gifts made in the expectation of a return favour, or with reluctance are Rajasic.

Tamas quality faith, marked by gloom and indifference, are noted for the worship of elemental powers and the ghosts of dead men. Ascetics of an infernal tendency are found torturing their body; full of hypocrisy and pride, longing for the past to return, deluded, they torture the powers and faculties and even the Higher Self, in the body. Tamasic foods are those that were cooked the day before, and are tasteless, rotting, and impure. Worship, without faith, is Tamasic. Actions, such as self-wounding, false judgment, and the hurting of others are examples of Tamasic actions. Inappropriate and untimely gifts made to the unworthy and with scorn and carelessness are Tamasic.

(Gita 100-103, 115-118, see also W. Q. Judge's Letters That Have Helped Me, 100-3)

The Wise, perceiving that the embodied Self surpasses these qualities of goodness, action and indifference, which co-exist with the body, are released from the bonds of rebirth, death, old age, and pain, and drink of the waters of immortality. (Gita 124)

Devotional reading

Arjuna asks: What are the characteristic marks by which the man may be known, O Master, who hath surpassed the three qualities [satva, rajas and tamas]?

"He...who doth not hate these qualities—illumination, action, and delusion—when they appear, nor longeth for them when they disappear; who like one who is of no party, sitteth as one unconcerned...and undisturbed by them; who is of equal mind in pain and pleasure, self-centered, to whom a lump of earth, a stone, or gold are as one; who is of equal mind with those who love or dislike, constant, the same whether blamed or praised; equally minded in honor and disgrace, and the same toward friendly or unfriendly side, engaging only in necessary actions, such an one hath surmounted the qualities...I am the embodiment of the Supreme ruler, and of the incorruptible, of the unmodifying, and of the eternal law, and of endless bliss." (Gita 103-4)

To reach to the Supreme Spirit, Krishna offers these steps:

"Embued with pure discrimination, restraining himself with resolution, having rejected the charms of sound and other objects of the senses, and casting off attachment and dislike; dwelling in secluded places, eating little, with speech, body, and mind controlled, engaging in constant meditation and unwaveringly fixed in dispassion; abandoning egotism, arrogance, violence, vanity, desire, anger, pride, and possession, with calmness ever present, a man is fitted to be the Supreme Being and having thus attained to the Supreme, he is serene, sorrowing no more, and no more desiring, but alike towards all creatures he attains to supreme devotion to me. (Gita 129)

"With thy heart place all thy works on me, prefer me to all else, exercise mental devotion continually, and think constantly of me. By so doing, thou shalt by my divine favour surmount every difficulty which surroundeth thee... [In spite of any obstacle] the principles of thy nature will impel thee to engage. Being bound by all past karma to thy natural duties, thou...wilt involuntarily do from necessity that which in thy folly thou wouldst not do." (Gita 130)

"There dwelleth in the heart of every creature, O Arjuna, the Master—Ishwara—who by his magic power causeth all things and creatures to revolve mounted upon the universal wheel of time. Take sanctuary with him alone, O son of Bharata, with all thy soul; by his grace thou shalt obtain supreme happiness, the eternal place." (Gita 130)

References:

The Secret Doctrine, H. P. Blavatsky

Theosophical Glossary, H. P. Blavatsky

The Bhagavad Gita, W. Q. Judge rendition

Letters that have helped me, W. Q. Judge

Ayurveda, the Science of self-healing, Dr Vasant Lad

Philosophical ideas in Ayurveda lecture, Pr M S Valiathan, https://youtu.be/4FGiXbxU_w

The Guiding Philosophy of Ayurveda by Dr. G L Krishna <https://youtu.be/5G6kxZqmZy8>



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