

## **What is Ayurveda? And what is its Source?**

### **Why is it important today?**

"Ayu" means "life;" and "Veda" mean "wisdom" or "science". Ayurveda is the timeless spiritual science of life as described by the Rishis (the Sages) of ancient India. As a medical system, Ayurveda stems from the knowledge of universal, unchanging principles of nature and its effects on the mind and body as revealed by the Rishis in their meditations. This knowledge is codified in several ancient Vedic scriptures and has been taught and practiced in India since ancient times. The Caraka Samhita, The Sushruta Samhita, and The Ashtanga Hridayam are the major three texts on āyurveda (there is also a minor three and many others). Its mystical knowledge has been preserved and passed down for thousands of years by āyurvedic physicians called Vaidyas. Though there are now many prestigious āyurvedic universities in India, āyurveda was traditionally transmitted orally from Guru to student, or from father to son.

### **Āyurveda and Western Medicine**

Āyurveda is currently gaining much popularity in the Western societies where interest is growing in alternative health care and Eastern spirituality. Āyurveda is a natural and wholistic system of healing which employs herbs, mantras, meditation, and hatha yoga practices to heal the body, mind, and soul. It does well to treat conditions which are considered incurable by modern Western medicine because it aims to treat the person and not the condition. As opposed to the Western Medicine which treats the pathogens responsible for dis-ease by treating the symptoms, Āyurveda aims to restore balance to the body. Though Āyurveda has had knowledge of germs and bacteria since ancient times, they are not viewed as the cause of dis-ease. Western Medicine has difficulty to describe why many people are exposed the same pathogens but only certain people develop disease. Āyurveda understands this well. It knows that health or dis-ease is created by an individual's state of balance (strength, digestion,

immunity, etc.).

Āyurveda is quite good at treating many conditions that Western Medicine has difficulty to treat because it does not require knowledge of which bacteria or germs have caused a certain condition to provide effective treatment. Āyurveda provides simple wisdom for people to apply in daily life to maintain balance. It places great emphasis on prevention and its simple recommendations when properly applied are quite easy and effective to prevent many diseases. It cures many conditions completely because its treatments go to the root of the imbalance to reverse the condition from its source. Western treatments often eliminate symptoms quickly, but because they do not often get to the physical, emotional, or spiritual root of the dis-ease, these symptoms often manifest in various other ways.

For treatment of severe or acute conditions Āyurveda provides a system of treatments which are mild and non-invasive compared to the techniques of Western Medicine. Western Medicine routinely favors strong chemical medicines with severe and uncertain side effects. These drugs are produced by large pharmaceutical companies for the purpose of obtaining a “medicine” which can be patented and marketed without competition. Medicines are made through chemical processes which have not been thoroughly tested for their effects on the body and are not always safe. This can be easily appreciated by seeing a list of the potential side-effects of chemical drugs on the market or by seeing a list of drugs which have been sold and then later removed from the market due to dangerous side-effects. Āyurvedic herbs have been tested over a period of thousands of years by generations of physicians and patients in India. Herbs do not have side-effects, though they do have well-understood effects. The effects of herbs are mild and never lead to dis-ease or fatality when taken in the proper way. The mild actions of most herbs are much safer than those of prescription medicines even when they are taken in the inappropriate dosage or for the wrong condition. Many natural plants from which dangerous medicines have been derived by isolating the “active ingredient,” contain other naturally occurring substances

which balance the harmful effects of the “active ingredient.” When natural, whole herbs are taken in combination with other herbs their safety is even greater due to the synergistic action of the herbs, which act as a mystical, spiritual force for healing. Herbs do sometimes work slower than the chemical medicines, but their effects are gentle and they go to the root of the dis-ease, removing symptoms from their source.

The treatments of Western Medicine are often invasive, dramatic, and costly. Treatments like Chemotherapy and surgery are traumatic and often do more harm than good, depleting the already weak immunity of the patient. For severe conditions, Āyurveda uses the less invasive pancha karma. The five therapeutic actions of basti (therapeutic enema), nāsya (nasal administration of herbs and oils), virecana (purgation therapy), vamana (therapeutic vomiting), and rakta moksha (blood-letting) along with the pūrva karma (preparatory actions) of snehana (oiling the body) and svedana (sweating) and simple dietary and lifestyle changes and herbal remedies. These therapies are employed individually or in combination depending upon the specific needs of the patient. Each of the pancha karmas has a specific effect on the body to help to remove toxins which contribute to dis-ease. These therapies may sound dramatic to westerners, but they are all far safer and much less traumatic to the body than the modern surgical procedures which are becoming all too common in western society. The most intense, of the pancha karma, bloodletting is rarely practiced even in India and when it is, blood is taken in very small quantities when the patient has sufficient strength. It is comparable to the blood taken for testing by Western hospitals, except that it is taken strategically to help rid the body of toxic accumulation. Āyurveda provides cheap and natural substitutes for the expensive chemical drugs of modern day. It is a complete system for health, happiness, and well being. It gives people knowledge into the nature of their dis-ease and empowers them to heal themselves. The allopathic system does not generally take into consideration spiritual and karmic causes of dis-ease. Though karmic conditions are understood to a limited extent through the theory of genetics, genes are

considered unchangeable and therefore genetic conditions are deemed incurable. Āyurveda has a deep understanding of the spiritual causes of dis-ease and provides a spiritual system of treatments involving prayer, mantra, meditation, and yoga to help heal karmic and spiritual diseases from their spiritual source. The system of allopathic psychology is very young and has yet to gain much substantial understanding of the workings of the mind. Many psychiatric conditions are not well understood and are likewise considered incurable. Because āyurveda comes from the meditations of the Yogis who had become masters of their bodies and minds, it incorporates a deep understanding of the mind and its sub-conscious and super-conscious capacities. Studies are beginning to be conducted by a few Universities on these Super-conscious capacities of the mind. Āyurvedic psychology has a deeply profound understanding of peoples' mental and emotional nature. Ayurveda admits that all conditions are reversible including all sorts of psychiatric dis-orders. Ayurveda addresses the emotional and spiritual factors of dis-ease from the highest knowledge of God and nature. It assists people in their spiritual quest of God-realization / Self-realization. The treatments of Āyurveda assist in the process of empowering a person toward healing from the deepest level of the soul (not just from the physical level). Spiritual and Psychological causes for dis-ease are address with profound understanding. This helps cure obstinate and mysterious conditions and it uplifts people toward their highest spiritual and physical potential.

### Āyurveda and Yoga

Yoga has become very popular in the Western countries. There is now a Yoga center in almost every small town in America. Many of the larger cities have dozens of Yoga centers. Almost everyone in America knows the Sanksrit word Yoga, but understand of the true capacity of Yoga to heal the body, mind, and soul is still lacking. Many people treat their practice of Yoga as a mere means to physical fitness, but Yoga is capable of much deeper effects if it is practiced with mindfulness and knowledge of its true capacity to help a person overcome dis-ease and to

overcome the burden of worldly suffering by uniting the Soul with its True nature which is Divine. The practice of Āyurveda is complementary to the practice of yoga. Infact, the knowledge of Āyurveda is necessary for a person who wishes to apply the knowledge of yoga to their lives for healing or spiritual realization. Without knowledge of Āyurveda the practitioner of yoga would be at a loss to apply the principles of yoga to the specific needs of their individual body, mind, and soul. Āyurveda provides a systematic approach to life and health which categorizes conditions of the mind and body and treats them with therapies of dissimilar qualities. For example is a condition shows signs of heat, it has been caused by heat and is treated with cooling therapies. Ayurveda teaches the signs of heat in the body and teaches also what foods, herbs, mantras and practices will decrease such qualities. With the knowledge of Āyurveda it is possible to discern which specific mantras, meditations, āsanas, prānāyāmas, kriyas, and bandhas of yoga will be helpful to a person based upon their individual condition of health, strength, and spiritual and emotional need. When practiced with knowledge of one's vikriti (Āyurvedic constitution) the powerful practice of yoga will lead to health, peace, and balance in all aspects of the life of the yoga practitioner. When Yoga practice is done with knowledge of Āyurveda a person's practice will deepen and optimum benefit will be attained. Many people, though they are dedicated to healthy living and maintain dedicated Yoga routines, cause their body even more harm by ignorantly doing practices which are not good for their bodies. Yoga has a vast range of different practices, and it is very important for a person have respect for the power of these practices and to do the ones which are good for their body. It is sure that the powerful practices of Yoga which can give perfect health and infinite bliss to the Yogi who knows his own nature can lead to an equal measure devastation, dis-ease, and suffering when applied without proper knowledge of their effects.

It is important for Yoga practitioners to know their bodies and to understand the effects of the Yoga practices so that they can use them to improve their lives. When a person has mastered

the application of the practices of Yoga toward the end of healing their own dis-eases, overcoming their attachments, weaknesses, and obstacles, and maintaining a peaceful disposition and good interpersonal relationships in their day-to-day life, that person is fit to teach these practices to others. Though there are many Yoga Teachers who can teach the physical practices of Yoga, there are very few who have mastered the inner process of healing and working out their own individual karmas. Without this experiential knowledge of the inner process of Yoga, it is not possible to teach. Teachers should be very careful as not to mislead the people by recommending practice which are harmful to them, and they should know that they are karmically responsible for the harm they cause to their students. The powerful practices of Yoga should be respected and given to worthy students who respect the tradition of Yoga and sincerely wish to better their existence for the benefit of the world by working on themselves. A person must have a humble attitude to truly benefit from the practices of Yoga on a deeper level. If this is lacking from the disposition of the students and the teacher gives them knowledge of the practices of Yoga, this is like giving a loaded gun to a group of crying infants. For lasting health and happiness which requires the mitigation of the karmic causes of suffering the practice of Yoga must be done humbly, under the guidance of a qualified teacher, with knowledge of Hatha Yoga and Āyurveda.

The many ancient Yogis and Sages were also masters of Āyurveda. The author of the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali was also the author of a treatise on Āyurveda. It is very common for Vaidyas (Āyurvedic physicians) to prescribe yogāsanas, prānāyāma, meditations and other practices laid out by the Yoga-shāstras (Scriptures on Yoga) along with herbal medicines, dietary recommendations, and lifestyle recommendations. There is a deeply elaborate system of maintaining health, preventing dis-ease and healing all sorts of conditions of dis-ease using only the simple practices of Hatha Yoga. This Yogic system of healing adheres to the same philosophy and concepts as Āyurveda. The sister sciences of Āyurveda and Yoga share so

many of the same teachings and practices that it is difficult to clearly differentiate between the two. They are two different facets of the same gem of knowledge shared with the world by the ancient Sages.