

Ayurveda:

A Portal to the Past

&

A Window to the Garden

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“It is health that is the real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver,” Mahatma Gandhi. “The best doctor gives the least medicine,” Benjamin Franklin. “Let food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food,” Hippocrates. “Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing,” Ezekiel 47:12. Long before any of these sayings were quoted, before these men lived, thousands of years ago in India, wise men were creating a system of healthcare that encompassed the whole person; it would become known as Ayurveda.

Originating from Sanskrit, Ayurveda actually comes from two words: ‘ayur’ meaning life, and ‘veda’ meaning knowledge. It may be interpreted that Ayurveda is literally the knowledge of life, meaning we must look at all facets of a person; know their mind, body, and spirit. The goal of Ayurveda is to balance the mind and the body; create a high quality of life and overall wellness throughout life. This is achieved through looking at the total person: medical, spiritual, philosophical, and psychological aspects. Passed along orally throughout its early centuries, Ayurveda gradually became India’s leading medical system. People are their environment and may change through mindfulness.

Formulated in the Indus Valley, more than 5,000 years ago, the science of Ayurveda was passed along verbally via chants, or sutras, until being documented in the Vedas. Written by the *Rishis*, great sages, who through intense meditation were able to see the universal truth and hold the knowledge of all things throughout time, the Vedas are believed to have been composed between 1,700 and 1,000 B.C.E. and contain the awareness and conclusions of those dating back thousands of years further. These “books of wisdom” are regarded as the “oldest written knowledge in human history” (Ketabi, 4). They hold ideas from healing the body and empowerment, to lifting the spirit and achieving greater consciousness. Although no one knows

how the Rishis gained this great knowledge, it is said that it came directly from the universe, so they could heal and better the people.

A few hundred years later, around 800 B.C.E., Punarvasu Atrya created the first Ayurvedic medical school, which later inspired the writing of the *Charaka Sambita*. Charaka, a philosopher that lived around 700 B.C.E., documented over 1,000 plants in his text, labeling around 350 of them as medicinally useful. This work is recognized as Ayurveda's first major text. The *Susruta Sambita*, written a century later, forged the way for modern surgical technique, and is referenced to this day. Ayurveda continued to spread and gain popularity, gradually making its way to surrounding countries, setting the example for many cultures.

Traveling east along the Silk Road, Ayurveda made its way through China and down to Indonesia. Traditional Chinese medicine was largely influenced by Ayurveda; by 700 B.C.E. Chinese scholars traveled to India to study; Ayurvedic texts translated into Chinese circa 400 B.C.E. The practices also moved west to the Persian Empire, Arabia, Europe, Egypt, and Somalia. Arab traders documented the Indian herbs in their *Materia Medica*, which would reach the Roman and Greek Empires, laying the foundation for Herbology and European medicine.

At the same time as it was gaining traction to the east and the west, Ayurveda was getting a little help spreading throughout Asia. Born around 550 B.C.E., The Buddha practiced Ayurveda; as Buddhism traveled across Asia, so did the Ayurvedic ways. Before modern discoveries were made in science concerning the human body and brain, Ayurveda described disease and imbalance, and how to bring a person back to physical, mental, and spiritual wellness. Without Ayurveda too many questions would have remained unanswered.

“Our bodies are our gardens, our wills are our gardeners,” William Shakespeare. During the mid-19th century, while India was under British rule, Ayurvedic ideals, thought to be antiquated by the westerners, were prohibited. Although no longer public, Ayurveda was practiced and passed on in private homes, through homemade remedies and recipes. It became known as ‘kitchen medicine,’ meaning that people would heal their families at home through nutrition: food, spices, herbs, and oils. Eventually these profound ideas resurfaced and continued to spread across the world once again. Today, many people are unaware of how Ayurveda is already part of their own lives.

“When diet is poor, medicine is of no use, when diet is good, medicine is of no need,” Ayurvedic philosophy. As Western medicine has taken over and people have moved toward the consumption of food-like items, rather than real, whole food, preventable disease rates have risen. Diseases of affluence, such as obesity, diabetes, and heart disease, have spread exponentially despite advances in medicine and technology. More and more people are seeking a holistic approach to healing their physical and mental issues, tired of being in limbo due to the practices of Western medicine.

“The part can never be well unless the whole is well,” Plato. Ayurveda looks at the whole person, their mind, body, and spirit, not just a symptom; it prescribes a balanced lifestyle rather than a pill. An ayurvedic practitioner does not rush to make an assumption as to what will fix a person; they take their time to ask all the questions, to know what is wrong with a person, what the possible causes are, where the imbalances lie. Living a balanced lifestyle requires more effort and self-control than taking a prescription, but the outcome is much more powerful. As Western medicine becomes less personal, Ayurveda becomes more sought after. Although lying

dormant for decades during the Crown rule in India, Ayurveda is currently experiencing a revival, not just in India, but globally.

Luckily, this ancient knowledge has held up to the test of time. Ayurveda was first documented in the ‘books of wisdom,’ the Vedas, which provide guidelines of how to live the best life, one of total well-being. Hinduism is based on these, the most ancient Sanskrit texts. The four main Vedas are: The Rig Veda, the Yajur Veda, The Sama Veda, and the Atharva Veda. There are four secondary teachings called the Upavedas; these are narrowed down into specialties. They are Gandharvaveda, the study of the arts; Dhanurveda, the science of war; Ayurveda, the science of life and well-being; and Sthapartaveda, the study of architecture. The Vedas and Upavedas are the maps of life; they describe how to build civilizations from structures to culture, the arts; they explain the significance of being well-rounded, balanced people and communities.

According to Ayurveda, there are six philosophies of life: the Shad Darshan. They are Vaisheshika, Nyaya, Samkhya, Vedanta, Mimamsa, and Yoga. Samkhya, Nyaya, and Vaisheshika have to do with the physical, the body, the outside; while Mimamsa, Vedanta, and Yoga are concerned with consciousness, the mind, the inside. Optimal health comes with the balance of these philosophies, the physical with the consciousness, the body with the mind, the inside with the outside. Ayurveda further explains life with five elements and the three doshas they create. The five elements are: Prithvi (earth), Jala (water), Agni (fire), Vayu (air), and Akash (ether or space). They make up the three doshas: Kapha (earth and water), Pitta (water and fire), and Vata (air and ether); which make up a person’s constitution. Every person contains all three of the doshas in varying amounts.

“The doctor of the future will no longer treat the human frame with drugs, but rather will cure and prevent disease with nutrition,” Thomas Edison. An ayurvedic practitioner begins their diagnostic by discovering a person’s doshic balance. They go on to learn about the person, the entire person, physically, mentally, and spiritually, past and present. Once they have knowledge of the person, of their whole life, they may create a plan to help the person back to internal stability, and optimal health, inside and out. The plan may include foods, spices, and herbs that help to elevate and suppress each of the doshas, returning the body to equilibrium.

Many of the foods and spices are recommended based on the doshas. The herbs, however, can be used alone or in blends to treat a variety of conditions or for general wellness, despite the dosha. The issues they are used to treat are believed to be caused by certain doshic imbalances though, and they are each thought to promote a specific dosha, or two. Many of the herbs have become popular in the west, sold as powders, capsules, and teas in health food stores, while others are less well-known. Some of the herbs are used in cooking by different cultures. Several of the herbs are used in beauty products for the skin, hair, and oral health.

An adaptogen is a botanical that is believed to help the body adjust to stress, to help maintain a balance internally when the body is under pressure, either physical or mental. They have been used for thousands of years for well-being and longevity yet have more recently been coined ‘adaptogens.’ First used in the 1960s by Russian scientist N.V. Lazarev, the term comes from the word ‘adapt’ and the suffix ‘-gen’ referring to a substance that produces something. Although there are many Ayurvedic herbs, not all of them are adaptogens. Ashwagandha, tulsi, brahmi, licorice, and shigru are all Ayurvedic herbs that help the body adapt to stressors. These herbs may be found in the supplement store separately or as part of a stress formula in liquid tinctures, pill form, and herbal teas.

Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), a perennial shrub, has been used in Ayurvedic medicine for thousands of years and is currently one of the more popular herbs. A member of the nightshade family, ashwagandha may grow up to three feet tall in favored dry regions of its native India, Middle East, and Northern Africa. The herb's name is from two Sanskrit words: 'ashva' meaning horse, and 'gandha' meaning smell. The name describes the odor of the plant's fresh roots, which have a strong, horse-like smell. It is believed that consumption of ashwagandha will bring the strength and vigor of a horse. Sometimes referred to as Indian ginseng, this adaptogen benefits the immune system and the adaptation of the body to stress. Said to balance vata and kapha, ashwagandha is known as a rejuvenator, to bring relief of rheumatism and muscle pain, to calm the mind, and soothe the neuromuscular system. Ashwagandha also promotes naturally balanced testosterone.

Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), also known as holy basil, is one of the three most sacred plants in India; the others are soma and lotus. Tulsi is an Ayurvedic name meaning 'the incomparable one'. Grown near temples and private homes, tulsi is an adaptogen believed to purify the air and bless the surroundings. It is said to increase pitta, while balancing elevated vata and kapha. Tulsi is used to improve nerve, plasma, blood, marrow, and reproductive tissue. Antispasmodic, antibacterial, and antiseptic properties make holy basil popular for treating congestion, cold, and cough, headaches, stomach pains, bug bites, rheumatism, and arthritis.

Brahmi refers to two herbs in India, both considered adaptogens: bacopa (*Bacopa monniera*) in the south and gotu kola (*Centella asiatica*) in the north. They are considered to share many properties and are not easily separated in old Ayurvedic texts; both are utilized as a brain and nerve tonic. Bacopa, also called water hyssop, is said to be the stronger of the two brahmis; beneficial in treating mental issues, such as: depression, anxiety, epilepsy, and insanity.

Also used as a nerve tonic to build tissue, a diuretic, and a sedative for the heart, bacopa's list of benefits is long. Bacosides, one of the key components of bacopa, have been shown to increase nerve impulse transmission and improve memory and brain function. Recent studies are reporting that bacopa has the potential to treat both behavioral and cognitive conditions. "In a double-blind, placebo-controlled randomized trial, Bacopa improved virtually every measure of children's ADHD symptoms," (Singh,110).

Brahmi - from the Sanskrit Brahma: the creator, God, Cosmic Consciousness - is that which expands awareness. Gotu kola, also called mandukaparni or 'frog-leaved', enhances mental function and promotes intellect by acting on brain tissue, stimulating the brain. It is believed to reduce stress and calm the mind, while improving comprehension and understanding. Besides the possible brain benefits, gotu kola is anti-inflammatory, antibacterial, antifungal, and anti-amoebic, making it an excellent blood cleaner and skin disease treatment. The 'weaker brahmi' is also used as a decongestant by clearing mucus and sinus problems. It may also be used before bed to promote a peaceful, sound sleep without grogginess upon waking. Both types of brahmi are neutral for all three doshas.

Licorice (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*), also called sweet stick, is another multi-functional adaptogen. It lifts kapha, while suppressing vata and pitta levels. Chewing on a licorice stick helps to clean the mouth and teeth, even arrest tooth decay. A natural expectorant, licorice increases saliva and digestive secretions, and helps treat coughs, colds, and congestion. As an emetic, a few strong cups from the root will induce vomiting, bringing up the excess mucus from the stomach, helping to prevent build up in the chest. Licorice is also noted for use of peptic ulcers, gastritis, digestion, constipation, asthma, gallbladder inflammation, bronchitis, and even diabetes.

Shigru, another notable adaptogen, is also known as moringa (*Moringa oleifera*) or drumstick tree. The dosha balancing effect is uniform for this fast-growing, adaptable northern Indian native. The ability of this tree to grow in hot drylands to humid tropical areas, has made moringa popular from West Africa to Fiji. Shigru's leaves and seeds are used to treat colds, fever, joint pain, gout, diabetes, and infectious diseases. Ayurveda claims the tree may help prevent hundreds of diseases; it is anti-inflammatory, antispasmodic, a diuretic, and an antibiotic. Also, due to its nutrient density, moringa is used as food. The plant provides more calcium than milk, more potassium than bananas, more iron than spinach, more vitamin C than oranges, is about 17% protein, is a good source of amino acids, B vitamins, and beta-carotene, and is low in carbohydrates and lipids. Moringa is called a 'superfood.'

Not all ayurvedic herbs are adaptogens, their uses are just as varied though. Many ayurvedic herbs are used in kitchens around the world to add flavor and spice, their ancient uses unknown to the chef. Cumin, fennel, coriander, saffron, cardamom, and curcumin are a few, well-known worldwide. From the parsley family, cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*) has a balancing effect on the doshas and is said to benefit the tissue of the liver and the spleen. Cumin is also anti-gas, like fennel and coriander. There are two types of cumin: common, green cumin and black cumin, also known as 'Imperial cumin.' Cumin is used for the common cold, light insomnia, as a diuretic, to treat hemorrhoids, to stay cool in hot weather, as an antispasmodic, and as an energizer. Black cumin was historically more popular prior to caraway being brought from Europe.

Fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) is another all dosha balancing herb. The seeds are often used to affect plasma, blood, marrow, and muscle tissues, treating flatulence (carminative), colic, and indigestion. It is said to have a warming effect on digestion, but a cooling mental effect. It

may also help a cough, as it is a moderate expectorant. Fennel is also known as an anti-inflammatory, antispasmodic, phytoestrogenic that may calm nerves and improve alertness.

Coriander (*Coriandrum sativum*), also called dhania, refers to the seed, while the leaves of the plant are known as cilantro, or Chinese parsley. Tri-dosha balancing, this herb acts on the plasma, muscle, blood, and heart tissues. Coriander is carminative and supports a healthy urinary tract. It is used for urinary tract infection, burning urethra, vomiting, indigestion, urticaria (hives), rash, burns, hay fever, allergies, and sore throat. It is often used with ginger as a cold and flu remedy.

A narcotic in large quantities, saffron (*Crocus sativus*) is a very expensive herb. It helps to decrease pitta and balance vata and kapha, while benefiting all body tissue, especially the blood. Saffron is antispasmodic, rejuvenating, energizing, carminative, and an aphrodisiac. It is used to soothe menstrual pain and menopausal symptoms, as well as for impotence and infertility. It may be used to treat an enlarged liver, anemia, asthma, rheumatism, hysteria, depression, and neuralgia. While it is great for circulation, particularly a woman's reproductive system, it is warned that use during pregnancy may cause miscarriage (Singh, 177).

Cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*) is another common kitchen herb, used in recipes besides for its blood, plasma, marrow, and nerve tissue benefits. Stimulating and refreshing, it effects vata and kapha by mellowing them, while it raises pitta. This carminative, energizing, antispasmodic is used to treat colic, indigestion, asthma, bronchitis, cough and cold, and poor absorption. Native to India and a relative to ginger, green cardamom grows on a tropical vine and is known to be anti-inflammatory and pain-relieving. More commonly used by Ayurveda is black cardamom, native to the Eastern Himalayas, which increases the appetite and is used as a heart and liver tonic.

Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) has recently become extremely popular as a supplement, rather than for its food spice value. Curcumin is the most studied compound in the root and what makes it yellow. Turmeric, which decreases kapha and increases both pitta and vata, works on all tissues and is anti-inflammatory, antiarthritic, choleric (increasing bile secretion), carminative, antifungal, antibacterial, anti-atherosclerotic, hypotensive, and anticancer. It is used to treat jaundice, congestion, respiratory issues, cough, asthma, sprains, wounds, pain, swelling, blood sugar, bruises, toothache, inflamed tonsils, and to purify the blood. Turmeric may also aid in digestion, prevent gas, and promote optimal large intestine flora. Turmeric comes from the Sanskrit word *haridra*, which means ‘to carry away illness.’

Aside from the cooking spices, there are Ayurvedic herbs and herbal formulas that cleanse and aid in achieving ideal gastrointestinal harmony. Amla, guggul, neem, and triphala are just a few. Amla, also called *amlaki* and *amalaka* (*Emblica officinalis*), and Indian gooseberry, comes from Sanskrit word meaning ‘the sustainer.’ Amla is cleansing, especially of the intestine, healing, rejuvenating, by restoring tissue, and may increase red blood cell production. It affects all tissues and elements while helping to raise kapha, stifle pitta and vata, and increase the Ojas, the “concentrated essence of nutritional substances in the tissues: vigor, strength, and vitality,” (Singh, 318). Amla has recently become popular for its reparative implications for hair and skin, and is a great source of vitamin C.

Guggul (*Commiphora mukul*) is cleansing, rejuvenating, and detoxifying, while decreasing kapha and vata, and raising pitta. Unlike many of the other herbs, of which the roots, leaves, seeds, and stems are used, the resin of the guggul is the sought-after part of the plant. It is anti-inflammatory, pain-relieving, antispasmodic, energizing, antiseptic, and an expectorant. Working on all tissues, guggul cleans the skin and mucus membranes, may raise white blood cell

production, and treats obesity, anxiety, skin issues, bronchitis, gout, diabetes, hemorrhoids, ulcers, and most traditionally, arthritis. It may also help menstrual symptoms, nerve pain, and digestive problems.

Neem (*Azadiracta indica*), also referred to as Persian lilac, is both cleansing and healing, while increasing vata and decreasing pitta and kapha. Currently called “the village pharmacy” and historically known as “sarva roga nivarini (that which keeps all diseases at bay),” neem can be found in a wide variety of products, (Singh, 162). Working on blood, plasma, and lipid tissues, neem is used to treat skin diseases such as: eczema, urticaria, and ringworm, as well as cough, vomiting, fever, obesity, diabetes, arthritis, malaria, and tumors. It is a blood purifier and a detoxifier. Neem oil may be applied topically for muscle and joint inflammation.

Triphala, ‘three fruits,’ is an herbal formula made of three Ayurvedic herbs: amla, bibitaki, and haritaki, most notably known as a bowel tonic. It is said to be the most compatible blend, tri-dosha balancing, helping anyone that takes it. Triphala moves stagnate ama, or toxins, from the gastrointestinal tract, out of the body, and is believed to nourish the eyes, skin, and liver. As mentioned before, amla is cleansing and rejuvenating. Bibitaki (*Terminalia belerica*) works on plasma, muscle, and bone tissue, and alone treats cough, bronchitis, laryngitis, parasites, dysentery, and stones. Haritaki (*Terminalia chebula*) works on all tissues as a tonic, astringent, nervine, expectorant, and laxative. It is rejuvenating and is used to treat asthma, malabsorption, distention, parasites, jaundice, spleen problems, vomiting, itching, anxiety, heart disease, and tumors. Triphala is said to take up volumes worth of space in Ayurvedic literature.

“From a mechanical point of view, it is the interaction of biochemicals between human and plant that causes any given therapeutic effects,” (Atreya, 87). It is amazing that wisdom from over 5,000 years ago is still alive and well, finally coming back to the masses. It is brilliant

that so long ago, before all of today's technology was ever dreamed of, there was more personalized diagnostic practices than there are now. It is even more exciting that these substances are being studied and tested by modern-day standards. The list of Ayurvedic herbs keeps going, too. Arjuna, 'open-hearted' from Sanskrit, is a heart tonic, said to help both physically and emotionally. Shatavari, 'able to have one hundred husbands' from Sanskrit, aids in the female reproductive system and libido. There are so many interesting herbs, formulas, tonics, and recipes used in Ayurveda. We have been given the gift of everything we need to find which ones will work best for each of us, based on our own constitution, if we are willing to put in a little effort.

“The purpose of these remedies is not to suppress the effects of illness as is often the case in Western medicine, but rather to bring the out-of-balance factors in the body into harmony once more,” (Lad, 129). I am looking forward to getting some free time this summer to take the doshic quiz myself and try to find personal balance. I already use some of these herbs as supplements daily but am now going to search for them in their whole plant form to work on producing my own teas, tonics, and pastes. I have recently been practicing meditation but want to also include yoga and Ayurvedic timing to my days. It is truly mind-blowing that all of these pieces to Ayurveda, that seem like such great ideas, eluded so many of us for so long. I feel blessed that through my research for this paper, I have learned so much more about herbs and how they can help to balance us, sparking a need for knowledge. I am ready to discover more about myself and return my mind, body, and spirit back to balanced, so I can find optimal well-being!

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