

A Y U R V E D A

The Science of Life

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

THE VEDIC ARYANS BELIEVED IN A VIGOROUS life of health, strength and vitality. They paid as much attention to the culture of the body and the arts of war as to the science of the mind and the spirit. This gradually resulted in the 'Ayurveda' or the 'Science of life,' the elements of which have been found even in the *Rig-veda*. However it is in the *Atharva-veda* that a more detailed—and to some extent, systematic—treatment of the subject is found.

Though the word 'Ayurveda' appears to limit its scope to purely physical health, it is not so. Its approach to health is holistic and includes not only the physical but also the mental and spiritual aspects of health in the context of man's interaction with his environment. While doing so, it deals with several subjects which may be categorized briefly as follows: philosophical speculations about matter and life, general ethics, biological theories including embryology and genetics, physiology and pathology, food, nutrition and diet, general rules of health and longevity, diagnosis and treatment of diseases, and poisons and their antidotes.

As in the case of other ancient Hindu sciences, the origin of Ayurveda also is buried in the bosom of hoary myth and tradition. Starting with Brahma the Creator himself, this science was handed down first to the Ashvins, the twin deities, and then to Indra. Then it is said to have branched off into two streams—medicine and surgery. Bharadvaja, Atreya Punarvasu and the six disciples of the latter like Agnivesha and Kshirapani established the science of medicine whereas Sushruta established the science of

surgery. Modern scholars are inclined to believe that Dhanvantari and Divodasa, the king of Kashi, the other two well-known names, actually represent the same person, Bharadvaja, and that Atreya and Sushruta are identical. They also hold that Charaka and Sushruta are historical personages who organized the two bodies of knowledge, medicine and surgery. They probably lived in the pre-Christian era and the redaction of their texts was done in the early part of the post-Christian era.

Classical texts of the Ayurveda, especially those of Charaka and Sushruta, contain certain metaphysical speculations about matter and life. They generally follow the Sankhya-Vedanta view of cosmogony and the allied Vaisheshika view of inherent nature of substances. All material substances are evolved from the interaction of *prakriti* (the dynamic principle comprising the three gunas, sattva, rajas and tamas) and *purusha* (the static and conscious principle). The material bodies of human beings are composed of *kalā* (protective layer), *dhātu* (component matter), *mala* (eliminations), three *doshas* (humours), *agni* (digestive fire) and *kriyā* (movement of activity). These components, as also the *panchamahābhūtas* (five gross elements) impart their specific nature and properties to the individual in proportion to their presence.

Most of the standard texts of the Ayurveda deal with the subject under eight topical headings—hence the appellation 'ashtānga'—as follows:

Kāyachikitsā (therapeutics), *Shalyatantra* (major surgery), *Shālākya-tantra* (minor-surgery)

 This bird's eye-view of the Indian system of Medicine is by Swami Harshananda who is the head of the Ramakrishna Ashrama at Bangalore. He has a number of books in English, Sanskrit and Kannada to his credit.

including ENT), *Bhūtavidyā* (psychiatry), *Kaumārabhritya-tantra* (paediatrics), *Agada-tantra* (toxicology), *Rasayana-tantra* (geriatrics) and *Vājīkarana-tantra* (virilification).

Kāyachikitsā relates to the treatment of diseases affecting the whole body. The diseases are said to be the result of the imbalance of the three doshas or humours. An excess of *vāta* or wind can lead to nearly eighty diseases. The treatment of such diseases involves the liberal use of medicated oils. A surfeit of *pitta* or bile can cause as many as forty diseases affecting blood, eyes or skin. The treatment is generally centred round purgatory processes and medicines. A profusion of *shleshmā* (phlegm) can produce twenty illnesses affecting the throat, the digestive and the excretory organs. Administration of certain astringent substances to make the patient vomit is an important course of treatment adopted in curing this defect.

Shalya-tantra deals with the methods of removal of arrows (*shalya*=arrow) and other foreign bodies, obstetrics, treatment of injuries and diseases requiring major surgery. The *Sushruta-samhitā* which is a great classic in surgery, gives an amazing amount of information regarding the use of about hundred surgical instruments, alkalis, bandages, pre-operative preparations and post-operative care including nursing. Plastic surgery too was known to the ancient surgeons.

Shālākya-tantra is concerned with the treatment of the diseases of the body above the clavicle (ENT), using thin bars, small sticks and probes as instruments.

Bhūtavidyā treats of mental derangements and disturbances believed to have been caused by malevolent spirits. Apart from prayers and exorcism, administration of certain drugs is also mentioned. Mention is also made of *pancha-karmas* or five purificatory processes which help to relieve the mental illnesses. Analysis of dreams of the patients in order to find out the root causes was also attempted.

Kaumārabhritya-tantra deals specially with obstetrics, female diseases connected with child-

birth and the diseases of children, many of which were considered to have been caused by demons. Attention has been paid to the healthy upbringing of children.

Agada-tantra discusses methods of diagnosis and treatment of snake poisoning, scorpion or insect bites and other cases of poisoning. A very large number of poisons have been mentioned with appropriate remedies including mantras that eliminate or destroy the poisons.

Rasāyana-tantra deals with the methods of preservation and increase of vigour, restoration of youth, improvement of memory and prevention of diseases. The medicines are prepared out of mercury, precious stones, and certain other materials.

Vājīkarana-tantra describes the means of increasing virile powers as also prevention and cure of venereal diseases. The standard works generally extol brahmacharya (continence) as the best means.

The techniques of diagnosis of diseases had been fairly well-developed. Apart from his own observations and inferences, the physician also depended upon the instructions of the wise. Other factors which helped in the diagnostic process were: the normal constitution of the patient, the time and season of the first appearance of the disease, the things that give comfort or relief to the patient, the things that cause aggravation of the disease, the state of digestion and appetite, the way the organs of evacuation are functioning, and, whether the disease is in an advanced stage or not.

During the medieval period, '*nādi-vijnana*' (the science of pulse) came to be a major means of diagnosing the condition of the three *doshas*.

Treatment of diseases, according to Ayurveda, depends upon four factors: physician, patient, medicines and attendant nurse. Factors governing the treatment are *purusha* (patient), *vyādhi* (disease), *oshadhi* (medicine), *kriya* (processes) and *kala* (seasonal and climatic factors). *Āhāra* (diet) and *āchāra* (right conduct and medical regimen) were also considered important. *Samshamana* (sedation) and

samshodhana (purgatory processes) were often resorted to.

Texts of Ayurveda lay down a strict code of conduct for the physician. He should treat the patients to the best of his ability since they trust him for their lives. He should refuse to treat morally depraved persons who are a scourge to the society. He should also refuse to take up terminal cases where he is sure that death is imminent. Nor should he undertake the responsibility of treating patients suffering from incurable diseases. Once he accepts a patient, he should provide him with proper medical and nursing facilities. He should never attend to a woman patient in the absence of her husband or guardian. All professional information should be kept strictly confidential. He must have compassion for his patients, look upon them as his own children, but, adopt a philosophical outlook in respect to cases proving fatal.

Ayurvedic theories and practices were also applied to animal and plant life. There are voluminous medical treatises on plant life (*vrikshāyurveda*), bovine species (*gavāyurveda*), horses (*ashvāyurveda*) and elephants (*hastyāyurveda*).

A new type of Ayurvedic treatment, '*rasachikitsā*,' which incorporated iatro-chemistry or metallic compounds came into vogue around AD. 1300. Opium and certain other foreign drugs as also mineral acids and tinctures were incorporated into Ayurvedic pharmacology about AD. 1500.

There is evidence to believe that Ayurveda had influenced the medical works of Greece. Translation of several well-known Ayurvedic texts into Arabic prove the spread of the science in the Arab countries. Evidence is also not wanting to prove its spread in Central and South Asian countries.

One less Fool in this World!

Swami Atmaprakashananda, also known as Priya Maharaj, was one of the trustees of the Ramakrishna Math. He and Swami Tyagishananda were once engaged in famine relief work in Kerala. One night, they were ferrying some rice bags in a boat across a river. It was dark and somewhere in the middle of the trip, a big splash was heard. Unfortunately, one of the rice bags had gone down into the waters—one whole bag of a commodity so precious, especially at the time of famine. It was also known that some of the boatmen were wily and greedy rascals. They would intentionally push a bag or two overboard and then join in the hue and cry thereafter. Next day, when all the other had left, they would return to the spot. They knew where exactly they had dumped the bag—a shallow spot—would retrieve it and then appropriate it for themselves or sell it in the market for a high price.

Almost immediately after the first splash, another was heard! It was actually Swami Atmaprakashananda, who had suddenly jumped overboard to retrieve the drowned bag, for the cause of God in the suffering man. Those who were with him were naturally stunned and stood in consternation. Eventually he clambered back and when asked what had happened, explained why he had done that. Even so, Swami Tyagishananda expostulated with him, saying, 'But Maharaj, what if something untoward would have happened?' To this Swami Atmaprakashananda replied, with supreme unconcern, 'What would have happened? There would have been one less fool in this world!' What supreme dedication to the holy cause for which he had become a monk! What a sublime absence of self-importance!

—Swami Shastrananda