

Ayurveda (Science of Life)

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The Vedic Aryans believed in a vigorous life, a 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 Ayurveda or the 'science of life', the elements of which can be found even in the *Rigveda*. However, it is in the *Atharvaveda* 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 alone, it is not so. Its approach to the science of 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 as also general ethics; biological theories which include embryology and genetics; physiology and pathology; food, nutrition and diet; general rules of health and longevity; diagnosis and treatment of diseases; poisons and their antidotes.

As in the case of other ancient Hindu sciences, the origins of Ayurveda also are buried in the bosom of hoary myth and tradition. Starting with Brahma the Creator himself, this science was handed down first to the Asvins, the twin deities, and then to Indra. Afterwards it is said to have branched off into two streams, of medicine and surgery. Bharadvaja, Atreya Punarvasu and the six disciples of the latter like Agnivesa and Ksirapani established the

science of medicine whereas Susruta 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 Susruta are identical. They also hold that Charaka and Susruta are the historical personages who organized the two bodies of knowledge, medicine and surgery. They probably lived in the pre-Christian era and the reduction of their texts was done in the early part of post-Christian era.

Classical texts of the Ayurveda, especially those of Charaka and Susruta, 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 *kala* (protective layer), *dhatu* (component matter), *mala* (eliminations), three *doshas* (humours), *agni* (digestive fire) and *kriya* (movement or activity). These components, as also the pancha-maha-bhutas (the 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 *Ashtanga*—as follows:

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Kayachikitsa (therapeutics), *Shalya-tantia* (major surgery), *Shalakyā-tantia* (minor surgery including the E.N.T.), *Bhutavidya* (psychiatry), *Kaumara-bhritya-tantia* (paediatrics), *Agada-tantia* (toxicology), *Rasayana-tantra* (geriatrics) and *Vajikarana-tantia* (virilification).

Kayachikitsa 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 *vata* or wind can lead to nearly 80 diseases. The treatment of such diseases involves the liberal use of medicated oils. A surfeit *pitta* or bile can cause as many as 40 diseases affecting blood or eyes or skin. The treatment is generally centred round purgatory processes and medicines. A profusion of *shleshma* (phlegm) can produce 20 kinds of 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 effect.

Shalya-tantia deals with the methods of removal of arrows (*shalya*=arrow) and other foreign bodies, obstetrics and treatment of injuries and diseases requiring major surgery. The *Susruta-samhita* which is a great classic in surgery, gives an amazing amount of information regarding the use of about 100 surgical instruments, alkalis, bandages, pre-operative preparations and post-operative care including nursing. Plastic surgery too was known to the surgeons.

Shalakyā-tantia is concerned with the treatment of the diseases of the body above the clavicle (E.N.T.) using thin bars, small sticks and probes as instruments.

Bhutavidya 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. *Panchakarmas* or five purificatory processes which will help relieve the mental illnesses also find a place. Analysis

of dreams of the patients in order to find out the root causes has also been attempted.

Kaumara-bhritya-tantia 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 bringing up of children from the standpoint of health.

Agada-tantia discusses the methods of diagnosis and treatment of the bites of poisonous snakes, scorpions and insects, and other cases of poisoning. A very large number of poisons have been mentioned with appropriate remedies including mantras that eliminate or destroy the venom.

Rasayana-tantia 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 and precious stones apart from certain other materials.

Vajikarana-tantia concerns 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 processes were: the normal constitution of the patient, time and season of the first appearance of the disease, things giving comfort or relief to the patient, things that cause aggravation of the disease, nature 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, *nadi-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