

# WHAT IS AYURVEDIC MEDICINE?

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## Origins and Definitions

Ayurvedic Medicine is the major indigenous medical tradition of India and Nepal, where it is today a government-supported health care system whose methods are often practiced in conjunction with those of modern medicine, i.e., as a highly effective form of complementary or integrative medicine.

Its origins can be traced back not only to the herbal medicine practiced among the early Vedic Aryans, whose cultural descendants wrote the first Ayurvedic medical texts many centuries later, but also to the discovery and use of healing plants by various groups of ethnically diverse people who lived in prehistoric India before that time, including the Munda and the inhabitants of the Harappan civilisation.

The word *Ayurveda* comes from the Sanskrit word *Ayur* (often translated as “life,” but referring also to the entire process of life coming into existence) and *veda* (systematic knowledge). If we go back to the Vedic roots of Ayurveda and Yoga, we can see that these early sources are holistic in using methods of healing for all levels of being: physical, emotional, mental, spiritual, and social.

The preventative health/ home health care aspects of Ayurveda are really quite simple: once a person masters a basic understanding of the three

*doshas*, and learns the rudiments of healthy diet and lifestyle, he/she can follow these principles at home, often to great benefit.

The medical aspects of Ayurveda are more complex, and as in any medical system, require several years of study.

Ayurveda as a developed medical system, which describes specific diseases, their symptoms, causes, patterns of development, and treatments, probably did not arise prior to 500 bce. It is practically and philosophically closely linked to Yoga; both systems are based to some extent on an ancient philosophical system known as *Samkhya*, and both share common Vedic roots.

Classical Ayurvedic Medicine contained the following branches:

- *kayachikitsa* (internal medicine)
- *shalakya tantra* (ear, nose, and throat)
- *bhutavidya* (psychiatry)
- *vishagara-vairodh tantra* (toxicology)
- *vajikarana* (fertility and conception)
- *kaumara britya* (gynecology and pediatrics)
- *shalya tantra* (surgery)
- *rasayana* (rejuvenation and longevity)

## **Tridosha Theory: Vata, Pitta, and Kapha**

One of the reasons that Ayurvedic medicine is regarded as being such a powerful and effective system of non-emergency medicine is that, like western medicine, it has both a germ theory of disease, and medicines and therapies which were specifically developed to treat specific diseases of all types. But, in addition, it has another level of diagnosis and treatment which is unique to it, based on the theory of bio-energies called *doshas*.

Imbalances in the *doshas*, which occur both because of lifestyle choices which we make, as well as things which happen to us and seasonal changes and climatic disturbances; create difficulties in our physical bodies and our minds. If these imbalances persist over a period of time, they often lead to disease.

An Ayurvedic Medicine Practitioner seeks not only to treat the presenting symptoms, but to resolve, as well, the underlying imbalances of the *doshas* which contributed to their development. Sometimes the practitioner can bring about a positive result just by balancing the *doshas* alone. When the imbalances are not severe, this is often easily done:

- Excess *vata* is treated by strategies, whether they be yoga, diet, lifestyle, or medicines, which warm, lubricate (i.e. oil), and calm.
- Excess *pitta* is treated by strategies, whether they be yoga, diet, lifestyle, or medicines, which cool and calm
- Excess *kapha* is treated by strategies, whether they be yoga, diet, lifestyle or medicines, which warm, dry, and stimulate.

### **More about the *doshas***

From their writings, it would seem that the *rsis* of ancient India had some concept of the inter-convertibility of energy and matter, and they described the transformation from energy to matter as occurring in stages, from energies (*tanmatras*), to potentials for matter (*mahabhutas*), to bio-energies (*doshas*).

Energy, according to several closely-related creation philosophies collectively termed *Samkhya*, can exist in five states of matter:

- 1) Pure space, devoid of matter (*akash*)
- 2) Gaseous (*vayu*, sometimes translated as “air”)
- 3) Luminous/combustive (*tejas*, sometimes translated as “fire”)
- 4) Liquid (*ap*, sometimes translated as “water”)
- 5) Solid (*prithvi*, sometimes translated as “earth”)

These capacities for matter formation give rise, in turn, to three primary bio-energies, *Vata*, *Pitta*, and *Kapha*

## ***Vata Dosha***

*Vata*, the movement principle, formed from *akash* and *vayu*, and having the qualities of emptiness, expansiveness, subtlety, coldness, dryness, roughness, movement, instability, and variability. (Note that the descriptions attributed to *vata dosha* are similar in many ways to the chemical definition of a gas—no definite form, molecules move very fast, expand to fill the volume of the container, etc.)

***Vata***, as a principle, underlies all movement in living beings, including thought. It is described as being particularly strong in certain locations in the physical body where there is a great deal of movement:

- the colon and abdomen (*apana vata*), where it promotes the downward movements involved in evacuation, urination, menstruation, ejaculation, ovulation, and birthing, as well as the movement of the legs.
- the small intestines (*samana vata*), where food is moved through

approximately 21 feet of digestive tubing in the process of its digestion and absorption.

- The chest (*prana vayu*) where *vata* expresses through movements of the heartbeat, breath and breathing apparatus, and trunk and arms.
- The head (*udana vayu*) where movements involved with speech occur (in association with *prana vayu*), as well as cognition and the brain as the center of the nervous system.
- The entire body, where *vyana vata* circulates blood, lymph, and nutrients through the vessels and tissues, and moves subtle energies through the auric field of the subtle body.

Whenever there is a disease condition involving lack of proper mobility of body or mind (scanty speech, loss of sensitivity or consciousness, etc.), ***vata*** is said to be either **deficient or obstructed**. Similarly, when drying quality of *vata* is absent, and in certain situations where fluid accumulates locally in the body, *vata* may also be said to be deficient or obstructed.

**Balanced *vata*** manifests as a healthy nervous system and healthy activity of the five *vayus*, liveliness, creativity, curiosity, sensitivity, enthusiasm, empathy, and intuition.

**When *vata* is excessive**, its qualities manifest in imbalanced ways in the physical, emotional, or mental aspects of the living being:

- Its dry qualities may manifest as constipation, dryness of the skin, sinuses, and eyes, and mouth, insufficient lubrication of the joints (eg. osteoarthritis), etc.
- Its movement and spacey qualities may manifest as insomnia, inability to focus the mind or sit still, nervousness, rapid or excessive speech, and inability to calm the mind.
- Its sensitive, subtle, and empty qualities may manifest as anxiety, anxious depression, over-sensitivity to stimuli, inability to gain weight, poor appetite or eating patterns, etc.
- Its cold qualities may manifest as chronic chilliness and intolerance to cold and wind.
- Its changeable qualities may manifest as inconsistent energy level and difficulty completing tasks or keeping commitments.

### **Factors Aggravating *Vata***

- Dry weather, cold, windy weather, high altitudes, and dehydration

- Excessive exercise, travel, or driving
- Grazing and snacking between meals, lack of regular healthy meals
- Too many cold and dry foods in the diet (rice cakes, granola, dried fruit, chips, powerbars, ice water, etc), stimulants in the diet, and ice water and cold drinks
- Insufficient intake of oils in the diet, insufficient protein and warm nourishing meals
- Suppression of natural urges (eg. tears, flatulence, urination, etc.),
- Insufficient sleep and/or staying up late at night
- Situations of fear, loneliness, or financial stress
- Any shocking or unexpected trauma of body, mind or emotion.

## ***Pitta Dosha***

***Pitta***, the thermal, or metabolic principle of the body is derived from *tejas* (and according to some traditions of Ayurveda, *tejas* and *ap*), having the qualities of heat, sharpness, oiliness, intensity, and penetration. It is closely related to the older Vedic concept of *agni*, or fire; the term *agni* is used in the Ayurvedic sense to mean digestive fire, existing in all tissues and cells of the body.

*Pitta* is said to be especially strong the muscular tissue of the body, in the red blood cells, and in organs of digestion and endocrine function. Its main seat is in the small intestines, because of the digestive functions of *agni* and the absorption of food. It is also said to be particularly strong in the following places:

- The forehead and eyes (*alochaka pitta*), where it promotes vision and mental concentration.
- The heart (*sadhak pitta*) as the major muscle of the body and on a subtle level, the seat of consciousness (some texts list the brain, as well, as a seat of *sadhak pitta*, for this reason).
- In the pancreas (and stomach) as *pachaka pitta*.
- In the liver and red blood cells (*ranjak pitta*)
- In the skin (*brajak pitta*)

Whenever the body lacks proper heat, digestive fire is low resulting in low appetite, lack of luster, poor perception or mental function, etc. or there is a failure of enzymic, endocrine, or metabolic function, we can say that *pitta* is deficient or obstructed.

**Balanced Pitta** creates a healthy metabolism and appetite, keen intellect and logical process, courage, inspiration, the confidence to overcome obstacles, and the desire for knowledge.

**When pitta is excessive**, its qualities manifest in imbalanced ways in the physical, emotional, or mental aspects of the living being:

- Its oily qualities may manifest as loose stools or acne
- Its sharp qualities may manifest as acidity, reflux, or criticism.
- Its heating qualities may manifest as various types of inflammation, night sweats, excessive appetite, anger, irritability, and frustration.
- Its intense qualities may manifest as perfectionism, impatience workaholicism, competition, obsession with achievement and control.
- Its penetrating qualities may manifest as bruising and excess bleeding.

**Factors aggravating *Pitta*:**

- Hot seasons, climates, and indoor temperatures
- Too many hot spicy, salty, fried, or acidic foods
- Red meat, alcohol, and carbonated beverages
- Drives or pressures to compete and succeed
- Situations of injustice or betrayal
- Incompetence of co-workers
- Loss of control of a situation

## ***Kapha Dosha***

***Kapha***, the structural principle of the body, is derived from *prithvi and ap*, having the qualities of coolness, wetness, density, stability, inertia, and it tends also to absorb and retain. *Kapha* is responsible for the formation and maintenance of the body's tissues, and for their lubrication. Its main seat is the chest and stomach, where it must maintain a strong mucosal lining for both the stomach and the lungs. *Kapha* is also associated with the serum portion of the blood and with the body's fatty tissues. It is regarded as being particularly strong in the following regions of the body:

- In the stomach (*kledaka kapha*) where it must form a mucosal membrane strong enough to contain the stomach's acid
- In the lungs (*avalambaka kapha*), where it must form a moist barrier between the dryness of the inhaled air and the wetness of the blood.
- in the brain and endocrine glands (*tarpaka kapha*) in the salivary glands (*bodhaka kapha*) to moisten the food

- in the joints (*shleshaka*), where it must provide for adequate lubrication

When emaciation or dryness of body tissues occurs, or feelings of internal heat and emptiness, or the joints or endocrine glands or the lymphatic system lose their lubrication and dryness of tissues occurs, *kapha* is said to be **deficient or obstructed**.

Balanced ***kapha*** creates healthy tissues and well-lubricated joints, a good memory and organisational capability, emotional stability, calmness, gratitude, commitment and responsibility, good humor, caring for the needs of others, and a feeling of fulfillment.

**When *Kapha* is excessive**, its qualities manifest in imbalanced ways in the physical, emotional, or mental aspects of the living being:

- Its dense, heavy properties may manifest as excess weight, benign tumors or other excess growth or deposition of tissue or plaque.
- Its wet qualities may manifest as excess mucous or water retention.
- Its heavy, cold properties may manifest as cold hands and feet and feelings of sluggishness.
- Its properties of inertia and retention can present as procrastination, complacency, denial, sadness, and depression.

#### **Factors Aggravating *Kapha*:**

- cool, rainy, or damp weather or climate
- too many bland, heavy, wet foods such as oatmeal and dairy products, sweet foods
- over-consumption of water
- cold foods such as ice cream and ice water
- lack of stimulating spices in the diet
- physical inactivity
- mental inactivity
- sleeping during the day

## **Vikrti: Imbalances, Symptoms of Disease, and Assessment**

The word “*vikrti*” means “false” in that it is a departure from our natural state of balance and health.

1) In the narrow sense, **Vikrti** refers to a departure of our *doshas* from their naturally occurring ratio in our **prakrti**, since such disturbances can cause a variety of symptoms. Uncorrected symptoms, can, in turn, lead to disease.

Please note that any person can have a *vikrti* of any dosha, regardless of what one's *prakrti* is. When a person comes to an Ayurvedic practitioner for a consultation, the practitioner will attempt not only to resolve the conditions of disease, but also to remove the underlying *vikrti* and return the patient's doshic ratio back to its normal *prakrti*.

#### **Symptoms Related to Excess Vata:**

- chills
- shakiness, trembling, tingling, dizziness, ringing in ears
- insecurity, anxiety, anxious depression, emptiness, emotional instability
- dryness of skin, body secretions scanty, dehydration, emaciation, excess hair loss
- lack of lubrication in joints; joints crack and spine goes out of alignment easily
- constipation, gaseous bloating of abdomen
- spaciness, poor concentration, mind spinning with thoughts, difficulty completing tasks
- inconsistent energy level, exhaustion
- sharp or moving pains
- exhaustion, insomnia, persistent yawning
- color darker (greyish or brownish) than usual
- headaches which are relieved by oil or massage
- symptoms which are worse in late afternoon and pre -dawn hours and in windy, dry, & cold weather

Ancient Ayurveda recognised 80 diseases attributable to *vata dosha* alone. Some of the more common conditions in which *vata* plays a prominent role include osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, chronic chilliness and low blood pressure, arrhythmias and heart palpitations, excessive and frequent clear urination, chronic insomnia, chronic fatigue, anxiety and panic disorders, depression related to low self-esteem, bipolar mood disorder, attention deficit disorder.

#### **Symptoms Related to Excess Pitta**

- inflammation
- pain which is tender or sore
- irritability, reactivity, frustration, anger, criticism
- excess bleeding
- color more red or yellow than normal, skin rashes
- excessive body heat or perspiration,

- hyperacidity, belching, nausea or vomiting containing bile
- diarrhea or increased numbers of bowel movements
- excessive appetite
- headaches relieved by cold
- reddish or burning eyes,
- symptoms aggravated around noon or early afternoon and in hot weather.

Ancient Ayurveda recognised 40 diseases due to *pitta dosha* only. Common conditions in which *pitta* plays a significant role include acne and chronic skin rashes, hay fever, chronic inflammatory diseases, peptic ulcers, hyperacidity, inflammatory bowel conditions, the most common forms of hypertension and heart attacks, urinary tract infections, hyperthyroid, severe depression which is accompanied by anger. Emotionally, *pitta* imbalances push one to excessive drives for achievement and behavioral tendencies to manipulate to control others.

#### **Symptoms Related to Excess *Kapha*:**

- Feelings of heaviness
- lack of motivation
- dullness, complacency, denial
- color more white than normal
- thickness of body secretions
- excess mucous, edema, or body fat
- low appetite and sluggish metabolism
- dull aches and pains
- excessive sleep or drowsiness
- slowness of bowel movements, low appetite
- dull headaches relieved by heat
- symptoms worse in morning or early evening or in cool, wet weather

***Diseases of kapha*** Ancient ayurveda recognised 20 diseases that are caused by *kapha dosha* alone. The most common diseases in which *Kapha* plays a significant role are: obesity, diabetes II, high cholesterol, edema, benign tumors, depression, chronic mucousy colds or flus, asthma with abundant mucous, atherosclerosis, and other excess deposition of waste products or tissue.

Many diseases are caused by the interaction of two or more provoked *doshas* acting together. For example, migraine headaches and m.s. are due to the interaction of *vata* and *pitta* together. The most common form of hypertension is caused by *pitta* and *kapha* working together. Alzheimers seems to be *kapha* and *vata* in nature. Most cancers, especially after metastasis has occurred, are said to be due to the interaction of all three *doshas*, thus explaining the difficulty in curing the disease.

Shorthand *vikrti* notation involves raising the number of the provoked *dosha* to show how severe the imbalance is, relative to the numbers of the person's *prakrti*. For example, a soldier of *prakrti* V1 1/2 P3 K2, has recently returned from the battlefield and is suffering from ptsd presenting as insomnia, dissociation, and anxiety attacks. We might write the *vikrti* of this person as V21/2 P3 K2, since *vata* is the aggravated *dosha*.

Another method of denoting *vikriti* is to list the provoked *dosha* along with the word “*niram*” (without *am*) or “*sam*” (with *am*). For example, *niram vata*, *sam pitta*. The first case indicates that the person is *Vata* provoked, but *am* (digestive toxins) is not present. In the second case, the provoked *dosha* is *pitta*, and *am* is present as well.

2) In the broader sense, the term “*vikrti*” can be used to refer to any unhealthy situation in:

- the *doshas*
- the digestion (*agni*) and elimination of wastes (*mala*)
- the tissues (*dhatu*s)
- the sensory and motor organs (*indriyas*)
- the channels of the body (*srotamsi*: includes, for example, digestive system, respiratory system, urinary system, nervous system, cardiovascular system, etc.
- the mind and emotions (*manas*)

#### METHODS OF ASSESSMENT

In addition to making use of the diagnostic information obtained by the patient’s western medical practitioners, an Ayurvedic practitioner will want to:

- question the patient in detail about symptoms, their origin and development, what makes symptoms better or worse, etc. and take a thorough medical history. The practitioner will also ask questions about additional body functions such as patterns of digestion, sleep, elimination; as well as obtaining information on diet and lifestyle. Finally, the practitioner will ask questions needed to enable him/her to assess the *prakrti* of the patient.
- make observations, eg., how the person appears, communicates, ease of movement, etc.
- examine the patient’s pulse. **Pulse reading**, though not part of classical Ayurveda, was adopted by Ayurvedists during the middle ages (either, it is believed, from Unani medicine or from Hatha Yoga). In modern times, some Ayurvedic practitioners also adopted the pulse reading system used in Tibetan medicine. Pulse reading is both a good preventative medicine tool and a diagnostic tool, which gives the

practitioner additional information about doshic imbalances in the body.

- examine the tongue and assess the quality and function of *agni* and other features. The coating and other features of the tongue, and information obtained from the patient about digestion and elimination, will enable the practitioner to assess whether *am* (digestive toxins) is present.

This is one of the most important components of the assessment process, since 1) Ayurveda regards *am* as the underlying cause of a great many chronic disorders and 2) both Ayurveda and Hatha Yoga regard proper digestion as the root of good health. In fact, one of the methods of denoting *vikriti* is to list the provoked dosha along with the word “*niram*” (without *am*) or “*sam*” (with *am*). For example, *niram vata*, *sam pitta*

## **Treatment Goals and Outcomes in Ayurvedic Medicine**

The goals of Ayurveda are to bring about the health of body, mind, and spirit. How, then, might an Ayurvedic practitioner define health?

Adding to the similar definitions of Sushruta, the great surgeon of ancient times, and Charak, the great Ayurvedic educator/physician, it is when the following conditions are met:

*The doshas are balanced.*

*The digestion is proper.*

*The body and its tissues are strong and well-nourished.*

*The senses are strong and healthy and function normally.*

*The wastes are formed properly and in the proper amounts.*

*The channels of the body are open.*

*Mental function is clear.*

*The person experiences bliss/peace.*

After listening to the person's concerns and questioning him/her about symptoms and medical diagnoses, and making an assessment of the above factors by various diagnostic methods (see **vikriti** section), the practitioner, in consultation with the person seeking healing, draws up a treatment plan.

The treatment plan chosen should address the following concerns:

- 1) If there is an infectious organism involved, it should be removed if possible.
- 2) If *am* (digestive toxins: see **vikriti section**) is present, it should be removed.
- 3) The *doshas* should be balanced, and the disease should be treated according to the appropriate methods for the disease and for the patient.
- 4) When treatment is complete, the patient should be offered *rasayana* (rejuvenation treatments).

### **Prognoses in Ayurveda**

Just as western medicine excels in diagnostic methods, emergency medicine, and surgery, Ayurvedic medicine excels in preventative health and in the treatment of many chronic and common illnesses, where it is often able to bring about very desirable outcomes with few, if any, side effects. Nevertheless, ancient Ayurveda did not consider all illnesses to be curable. The four prognoses of Ayurveda are:

- 1) Curable with ease:** Factors which might incline the practitioner to make this prognosis in the case of an individual patient, might include illnesses in which only one *dosha* is provoked, and the person has had the condition for a short period of time, only the respiratory or digestive channels are affected, etc.  
(eg. most urinary tract infections; most recent cases of anxiety or depression, most sinus infections, etc.)

**2) Curable with difficulty:** In this case also, the illness is curable, but it will take longer to achieve, and the desired outcome may require more types of interventions. One or two *doshas* are affected, the person has had the condition for a longer period of time, the illness may affect the blood and skin as well as the digestive tract or one of deeper tissues, etc. (eg. most early stages of M.S., allergies, acne, severe insomnia, candidiasis, most cases of chronic fatigue, etc.)

**3) Manageable only:** In this case, the patient may, with time and effort, achieve a very good state of health, but must for the rest of his/her life continue the natural treatments that proved most effective, and follow lifestyle and dietary recommendations diligently. Factors inclining toward this prognosis might include: provocation of two or three *doshas*, or the disease is more progressed, or several organs or deeper tissues are involved, etc. (eg. Diabetes II, psoriasis, rheumatoid arthritis, etc.)

**4) Incurable (in that Medical System):** The disease is very serious and very progressed, or ancient Ayurveda did not have the knowledge to treat it effectively at any stage.

## **The Ayurvedic Medicine Toolkit**

Ayurveda's "toolkit" for bringing about its definition of health includes the following :

- A healthy lifestyle which includes living in proper harmony with all aspects and beings of the natural world (including our own bodies) and avoiding activities or habits which are causing or contributing to the presenting conditions.

- Proper nutrition, including dietary practices and specific foods to help heal the person's condition.

**Dietary recommendations to prevent am**  
**Dietary recommendations to balance *doshas***

- Medicines (including herbs, herbal and mineral preparations, medicated oils, herbal syrups and alcohols, etc). Herbs are rarely taken singly in Ayurvedic practice. Rather they are combined classically in certain ways in order to enhance and balance each others' effects, and then formulated individually for each patient.

- Cleansing and rejuvenation practices (*panchakarma* and *rasayana*) which are powerful methods of balancing the doshas, removing toxins from the body's tissues

- Therapeutic Yoga practices appropriate to the individual  
(see also: "What is Yoga Therapy?" in the website menu)

