

Under the High Patronage of Indian's Embassy

2nd International
Colloquium
of Ayurveda

organised by Kiran Vyas on May 15th and 16th 2004

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Ayurveda, science and philosophy

By Nikolaos Kostopoulos

Ayurveda is one of the main traditional Indian medical systems. It is a part of the Vedas which are scriptures written in ancient times in one of the oldest languages of the world called Sanskrit. Ayurveda is considered a part of the Atharva Veda.

The term Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word consisting of two words Ayur(s) and Veda.

Ayus means life and Veda means science or knowledge.

In Caraka Samhita which is one of the classic treatises about Ayurveda the definition of Ayurveda is given in these words

“That is named the Science of Life, wherein are laid down the good and the bad life, the happy and the unhappy life, and what is wholesome and what is unwholesome in relation to life, as also the measure of life.”

The understanding of these two words: Science and Life is fundamental in our true understanding of this ancient wisdom and its application in a holistic way.

Words like bad and good, happy and unhappy, wholesome and unwholesome are very important because they relate to human experience, and responsibility.

They might sound dogmatic or Victorian but if used in an appropriate way they mean that each human being has a nature and an individuality that have to be known, expressed and followed if one wants to be healthy.

Human being is a psychosomatic entity and not the mere aggregate of different laboratory values and statistics. All the investigations are useful to monitor biochemical abnormalities and guide us in the diagnosis of a disease. However they are very limited to be able to show the totality of the causes of a disease.

Science is not simply observation and classification of phenomena. It is the understanding of causes and effects, and the application of this understanding in practical life that is Science. With the help of Science human beings can live happily and fulfil their purpose.

In today's medical science we find that there is a lot of research and theoretical knowledge in many medical specialities

but there is a lack of real cures and medications without serious side effects.

So autoimmune diseases, psychosomatic conditions, mental diseases, are by no means dealt with in a way that leaves the physician or the patient really satisfied.

Antibiotics lose their efficacy because of resistance of the up to now susceptible bacteria to such a degree, that even the good results of modern medicine in acute surgical cases and in intensive care units become jeopardised.

We can really say that modern medicine has dealt with the mechanism of diseases exploring the question of HOW a disease progresses but not the question of WHY an individual falls ill. Without this knowledge it is difficult to treat or prevent a disease effectively.

Life has a vast array of manifestations that is very easy to describe but very difficult to define. Health and disease are two phases of life that have to be dealt with in a holistic way for a proper cure to follow.

So there should be an effort by scientists to gain knowledge of Ayurveda for two reasons.

First, humanity existed for thousands of years and we might find that modern problems in medicine, can find new unexpected solutions in ancient textbooks.

This needs systematic high standards research and co-operation between individual scientists and institutions.

Second, by approaching health via a different angle we could help society to take a different approach to health and disease, with more personal responsibility, not only for the individual but for our eco-system that is so much a part of our heritage and wealth.

With these principles in mind we will analyse some of the ancient slokas or sentences in a more modern holistic way to give a glimpse of integrated approach to Ayurveda.

In Ayurveda it is declared that the whole universe is made of 5 elements that in Sanskrit are called panchamahabhootas and here is their basic description.

PANCHAMAHABHOOTA

The five proto-elements are the ether, air, fire, water and earth.

Sound, touch, colour, taste and smell respectively are the characteristics of the five protoelements.

Caraka Samhita. SA. I. 27

These relations between the 5 elements their qualities and the 5 senses is verified by the knowledge of modern neuroscience.

Ether relates with space and sound. Sound and space are linked neurologically because it is the ear that contains receptors for **hearing** and **equilibrium** (space awareness) via the 8th Vestibulocochlear cranial nerve.

Air relates with movement and touch. We know that the perception of **touch** is generated through a minute **movement** of specialized tactile receptors distributed nearly all over the body called mechanoreceptors.

Fire is linked with rupa (form, appearance, colour), which we perceive through **vision**. Our appearance is the final result of millions of chemical reactions guided by our genes. These reactions either absorb or generate **heat** and curiously enough in the Ayurvedic texts fire's characteristic is heat.

Water is related to taste and we know that for **taste** to be experienced substances have to be diluted in the water element of saliva which through its **fluidity** starts the process of digestion.

Earth is connected with the sense of smell. Olfactory brain is the most ancient part of the evolved brain that guided all the animals to find their way through **smell** on the earth.

So Ayurveda unites the external and the internal and gives the first glimpse of the importance of the mind body relationship through the use of the senses in the human being.

The next concept is related with one of the main factors that are causative of disease called volitional transgression or in simple words not seeing reality as it is, or wrong perception of reality.

PRAGNYAPARADHA

Whatever act is done by one who is deranged of understanding, will or memory, is to be regarded as volitional transgression. It is the inducer of all pathological conditions.

Caraka samhita Sa. I. 102

Here Ayurveda is looking in what science has discovered in the last ten years of neuroscientific research. Understanding, will and memory are three fundamental functions related with the brain. Frontal lobe, hippocampus, limbic system, and chemicals like dopamine and serotonin are the modern words that describe where and how these functions are performed.

Stress is one of the causative factors of many pathological conditions. Now we know that structures in the brain like the Hypothalamus and Pituitary, orchestrate a series of chemical reactions that have a profound effect in our health. Our thoughts and decisions affect our immune systems and our nutrition and lifestyle affect the way our brain is working. Modern specialities like psychoneuroimmunology have their foundation in this ancient writing of Ayurveda that connects the misuse of human intellect with the pathogenesis of disease.

One of the well-known words in Ayurveda is the word Dosha. This is the equivalent of bio-energy. There are three bio-energies running the whole system of human physiology and here is one of their descriptions.

TRIDOSHA

3. Vayu (vata), Pitta and Kapha are the three doshas, in brief; they destroy and support (sustain, maintain) the body when they are abnormal and normal respectively.

Ast.Hrd. Su. I. 6.

This principle that there are some bio energies in charge of the whole system is amazingly simple and profound.

We can say that our system is governed by the interaction of three entities or systems. Genes have all the prepacked knowledge that comes through millions of generations in the nucleus of our cells. Brain with its plasticity integrates this knowledge into daily experience and behaviour. External environment or the Cosmos interacts with genes and brain to create the diversity of life.

However it is very difficult to practically use this information in our daily life. Scientists that specialize in genetics, neuroscience, chemistry and physics find difficult to communicate because of the multiplicity and complexity of terms in these distinct fields.

Mobility representing Vayu, Reactivity representing Pitta, and stability representing Kapha are three energies that when they act in a balanced and measured way they maintain health whereas acting in an imbalanced way they induce diseases.

Ayurveda manages through this principle of tridosha to create a practical easily usable link of how our genes, and our mind interact with the environment in health and disease.

Here is the definition of Ayurveda with its reference as mentioned earlier.

AYURVEDA PARIBHASHA

That is named the science of life wherein are laid down the good and the bad life, the happy and the unhappy life, and what is wholesome and unwholesome in relation to life, as also the measure of life. Caraka Samhita. SU. I. 41

Here Ayurveda is defined in a holistic way. Ayurveda deals with what is right and wrong for an individual. This detailed understanding of the individual is a fundamental principle in today's scientific world of genetics and neuroscience.

Human beings are individual and unique and for each one of us there are appropriate and inappropriate ways to act and rest, there are foods we can eat and foods we should avoid, and different measures we have to follow according to our constitution.

Ayurveda recognizes that an individual has to be happy and that happiness is a very important part of a balanced state of health.

In this way Ayurveda has created a very broad definition of health of an individual human being and has introduced the art of being as a way to maintain harmony.

Finally here is the last sentence stating why Ayurveda is important for anyone who wants to live a long and healthy life.

IMPORTANCE OF AYURVEDA

Person desirous of (long) life which is the means (instrument) for achieving dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth) and sukha (happiness) should repose utmost faith in the teachings of Ayurveda. Ast.Hrd. Su. I. 2.

Ayurveda is very important because it offers the principles for a long and healthy life, which is the most fundamental part of every human being.

Spirit -mind -body are integrating in a unique way in each one of us. As a result we follow different dharma or duties, we accumulate wealth as a means for supporting our existence, we have different desires which we want to fulfil, and we all have a unique way to know more about our true Self.

Ayurveda teaches all this in a philosophical and scientific way recognizing that both science and philosophy are integrated in the human being.

By applying Ayurveda in a holistic and scientific way we can benefit as individuals and society. We have to remember however the principle of time and place for the application of this science for the individual prakriti in health and disease.

Human Being and its liberation from physical and mental suffering is the only aim of Ayurveda.

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If you would like more information on this holistic approach you can visit the :

www.holistichealthfoundation.org

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