

AYURVEDA – A NEW LOOK AT AN ANCIENT TRADITION, PART 1

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Ayurveda, a Sanskrit term meaning “science of life,” is the system of natural health that has been taught and practiced in India for up to 5,000 years. It is now experiencing a resurgence, both in India and the West, where people are discovering the potential for using its wisdom to establish and maintain health. While it appears superficially simplistic, it is actually a complex and elegant system for examining the interplay of mind, body, emotion and spirit.

The Ayurvedic sages knew intuitively what we are learning from modern physics; energy and matter are interchangeable. To them, the energetic state determines the physical state and health is a function of the proper balance of energies in individuals. Three main energies, called doshas, are said to govern our bodily processes. These can be looked at as bodily humors that penetrate every cell of our body. Vata, made up of space and air, is responsible for movement and communication. It is light, moving, dry, and cold. Pitta, mainly made up of fire, is responsible for digestion, metabolism and transformation. Its main quality is heat. Kapha, made up of earth and water, is responsible for structure, cohesion, and lubrication. It is cold, wet, oily, and heavy.

Each of us has our own unique balance of these qualities that determine what can be called our body-mind type. In some of us, one dosha clearly predominates. Most of us however, show a tendency towards two doshas with one being somewhat more dominant. Based on which of the doshas predominate, we can predict how we tend to get out of balance and act accordingly. Vata people tend to be thin and wiry. They have quick minds and are naturally enthusiastic. Their digestion tends to be somewhat irregular and they tire more easily. When unbalanced, they tend towards constipation, insomnia, arthritis, and worry. Pitta people have medium builds. They tend to have sharp intellects, strong digestion, and passion for what they do. They become more easily overheated and, when unbalanced, become angry and can develop acid problems and inflammatory conditions. Kaphas are sturdily built, have even dispositions, and are commonly described as “sweet” people. They are slower learners but have great retention. In general, they are slow plodders with great staying power, both physically and mentally. They can easily become overweight and when unbalanced become insecure and can develop mucous problems, diabetes, or benign tumors.

Different doshas also predominate at different times of the day, seasons of the year, and ages of life. From birth to about age 16 is Kapha time as is springtime and from 6-10 AM and PM. From age 16 to around 45-50 is Pitta time as is summer to early fall and from 10 AM –2 PM and 10 PM-2 AM. After ages 45-50, late fall and winter, and 2-6 AM and PM are the times of Vata. The seasons and phases of life are a bit more obvious. For example, spring tends to be cold and wet and children have more water per body weight and more mucous problems; all Kapha qualities. Fall and winter are cold and dry and we tend to become colder and drier in later life; all Vata. The times of day are subtler but come into play when looking at meals and sleep. It is better to eat the main meal of the day during Pitta

time, 10 AM-2 PM. Also, if we stay up past 10 PM we tend to get hungry! It is better Ayurvedically to go to bed before 10 PM and use the heaviness of Kapha time to help us get to sleep.

According to Ayurveda, imbalances in the doshas cause our digestion and assimilation processes to be disturbed so that our food is not completely burned. This creates a toxic residue in our systems called ama. The presence of ama is what allows infections and diseases to take hold. Much of Ayurvedic therapeutics deals with eliminating this ama and balancing the system so that it does not re-accumulate. In part 2, we will discuss some general ways this is accomplished and get a glimpse of the deeper possibilities available through Ayurveda.