

Originally published in 1986 by Paul Harvey

Part One

There is an increasing interest in the field of traditional Indian medicine. Until recently little was available in the West on this subject, but now there are avenues through which one can explore and learn about the form of holistic medicine known as Ayurveda.

Traditionally Ayurveda and Yoga went hand in hand, so for students of Yoga an understanding of Ayurveda will complement and help their Yoga study and practice. Furthermore in the application of Yoga as a therapy an understanding of Ayurveda is essential in working with imbalances that can cause or aggravate the disease process.

In this article some ideas will be presented on the links between Yoga and India's spiritual tradition before presenting the background to Ayurveda.

Yoga in the West

In the West we tend to perceive Yoga from the view point of our culture and its corresponding influences on the way we think. This can have advantages and disadvantages.

One advantage is that we can look at Yoga objectively without confusing it with the cultural mystique that can surround its practice and teaching. A disadvantage can be that because we know so little about Indian culture, we take that mystique to be an integral part of the practice and teaching of Yoga.

So our approach to understanding some of the fundamental concepts which surround Yoga needs to balance objectivity with an insight into the social and religious patterns within which Yoga is immersed. This idea can be used to enquire more deeply into some of the concepts that have influenced Yoga. By looking at Yoga per se we may be able gain insight into how it has influenced its surrounding culture.

Yoga in the East

India is the country wherein Yoga developed before being introduced to other parts of the world. This is why, to appreciate Yoga, it is interesting to know something about India, its culture, religion, and philosophy.

India's contribution to philosophical and religious thought can be seen as a precious jewel offered to the world. One view of this jewel is that it has three facets.

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1. *The Vedas*

The first is the Vedas, that great body of works concerned with sacred and religious ideals and their application within society and the life of the individual. In other words, the Dharma of the individual. How to live within society and fulfil certain moral codes and obligations, at the same time pursuing spiritual aspirations that take one nearer to the absolute.

2. *Yoga*

The second facet of the jewel is Yoga. Yoga is a means by which we can keep the mind, and therefore ultimately the body, free from those patterns which lead to disease and diffuse our mental energies.

A clear mind capable of continuous attention is required to fulfil our Dharma. Yoga provides the tool by which we can clear the mind and attain an intensity with which we can develop insight into the problems surrounding us. A mind beset with problems is unable to focus and direct its energies towards the pursuit of deeper issues.

3. *Ayurveda*

The third facet to this view is that of Ayurveda. Ayurveda is a holistic system of medicine that is indigenous to and widely practised in India. The purpose of this article is to outline the background of Ayurveda. Subsequent articles will look in more detail at concepts that are seen as integral to both Ayurveda and Yoga.

Ayurveda and Yoga

A study of the texts on Yoga practice emphasises the close link between the two disciplines.

Various texts talk about concepts which have evolved specifically within Ayurveda, suggest that the Yoga student of the time had an understanding of how the principles of Ayurveda were applied. Certainly the great masters of the Yoga tradition understood Ayurveda and applied its teaching when working with the needs of the individual student.

We can see from references in texts like the Hatha Yoga Pradipika that the tenets of Ayurveda were understood and used in understanding the constitution of students.

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Hatha Yoga Pradipika – 11.50 (Part)

Kapalasodhanam *Vatadosagham* Krmidosarhrt

(In describing the benefits of Surya Bedhana we are told it cleanses the sinal cavities and *influences imbalances of the Vata dosa* or the principle of air in the body.)

11.58 (Part)

Gulmaphlihadikan Rogan Jvaram *Pittam* Ksuham Trsam

(In describing the benefits of Sitali we are told it influences swelling of the glands, the activity of the spleen, fever and *imbalances of the Pitta Dosa* or the principle of fire in the body.)

11.65

Vatapittaslesmaharam Sariragni Vivardhanam

(In describing the benefits of Bhastrika we are told that it corrects *imbalances in the Tridosa of Vata Pitta and Slesma* or the principles of air, fire, and water as well as increasing the gastric fire in the body.)

The use of concepts like Tridosa, Vata, Pitta, Slesma when referring to effects or purpose of techniques show clearly they were understood and applied when working with student's particular constitution. The next article will explore these concepts.

Ayurveda and the Individual

According to Ayurveda everybody's constitution is unique in its balance of form and energy. This is the result of genetic and other influences that leave us as individuals with a group. This means that a person must be seen as an individual in terms of his body, finer energy, and persona.

This insight is still being reflected in the teaching of great Acharyas such as Prof. T. Krishnamacharya whose lineage extends directly back to the Yogi-Saint of the 9th century, Nathamuni. Nathamuni's teaching showed great insight into all the three facets mentioned, that of spirit, mind and body. Living a long life, having a body free from disease and a mind that is clear and sharp were of prime importance in the development of religious experience.

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So what is Ayurveda?

Ayurveda is one of the world's oldest healing systems; it is said to have developed as much as 3000 years ago in India. It may have been present before, but it was around this time that it was codified into the format by which we know it today.

Ayurveda was said to have evolved through the Rishis or Seers of India. These Rishis came to the conclusion that they needed to relate better to the world. In order to do this they needed to be healthy with clearer minds.

They explored the problem through deep reflection and from this enquiry Ayurveda evolved. The more they reflected the more they saw the innate connection between the plants, the animals, and man.

They observed that when an animal was ill it would find a certain type of plant to cure itself, and such ideas they related to the curing of human beings. Observations were continued over many, many years and were passed on through the teacher to the students. This format allowed for a development and refinement of the basic insight into what we see today as Ayurveda.

Ayurveda is a Sanskrit word which means the science of life, the knowledge of life. This is the goal of Ayurveda – how to prolong your life and your health. So to move into Ayurveda one moves into the idea of how to become healthy, how to retain the intention of being healthy and pass this on to others.

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Life means health; this encompasses physical health, mental health, emotional health, and spiritual health. All differ from one another. If you try to emphasise one at the expense of another you will not be healthy. So when we talk about health we must consider all the components that constitute the whole. This is why the Indian sciences of Yoga and Ayurveda have evolved to help develop or maintain whole health.

Ayurveda concentrates more on physical health, Yoga more on mental health. Unless the physical body is healthy all attempts at trying to be spiritual or developing a strong mental capability will be hampered.

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Health as Harmony

The Physical body needs to be in harmony with its surroundings. Ayurveda tells us we need to understand our individuality and our place in the Universe, to learn how we can live more harmoniously and in doing so prevent all possible diseases. Because where there is disease of the body there is disease of the mind.

So in talking about harmony or health of the body Ayurveda means harmony or health of the mind. Harmony of the mind is something we have to live, it is a rhythm we need to have when moving from one cycle to the next.

Harmony as Flow

If you know the rhythm you can flow along with the universe and the balance you have sustained will keep you free from disease. So your relationship with that flow will determine the quality of your life.

Ayurveda is the control of that flow, the control of the flow of life, of one's own flow of life. It is seen as a continuous flow commencing at birth, continuing into middle age and proceeding towards the grave. We need to know how to measure, to understand, and how to use the flow to sustain our well-being. This is why Ayurveda means knowledge of life, the science of understanding or gaining insight into the flow of life.

The Flow of Prana

If this flow of life is all important to our longevity and sense of well-being how can we recognize both its existence and its influence on our existence? Indian thought uses a common Sanskrit word to describe this flow or life force. That word is Prana, the word means "that which flows everywhere".

The next article will explore Prana and its relevance in understanding the basic concept in Ayurveda.