

Ayurveda: Medicine Of The Past, Medicine Of The Future

Once upon a time, some 5,000-10,000 years ago, there lived an ancient people who inquired into the world in which they lived. They looked to the skies and saw the celestial lights, and wondered in awe about their origin and meaning. They looked around at the world and wondered, "why am I here and what is the meaning of my life"? They knew the world around them was fraught with challenges and potential dangers, and they asked, how can I stay safe and healthy?

These people were among the earth's oldest human inhabitants, and they lived in the land known today as India. To answer their questions, the wisest and most learned of the clan went forth to seek explanations from the Gods. These wise men and women were known as rishis, the ones who had the gift to attune themselves to the ways of the Gods. As they meditated deeply, the Gods came to them, and answers were given. They learned about astrology and astronomy, about health, about air, fire and water, and they learned about ritual. This knowledge was passed down through generations with songs and chants, and then it was written down in the oldest of books now existing on the planet: the Vedas.

The wisdom of the Vedas is vast. The knowledge pertaining to health is known as Ayurveda^[1], or the science of life. The knowledge of Ayurveda was given to the rishis so that they might know how to stay physically and emotionally healthy, in order to pursue their deeper spiritual goals.

The Vedic teachings thrived in India, and Ayurveda thrived as well, for several millennia. Scholars, philosophers, and doctors journeyed from afar to India to study, and each took pieces of this knowledge home with them. It was a golden age of increasing understanding and deepening spirituality.

Then, between 700 and 1000AD, India was invaded by the Middle East. The Muslims went on anti-Hindu crusades and destroyed many of the ancient books. The knowledge of Ayurveda began to slip away. In the 1800s the British invaded India, destroying what was left. Schools were closed and books were destroyed, until Ayurveda vanished into the corners of society. In place of the Ayurvedic schools, western medical schools were established.

It wasn't until 1947, when India gained her independence, that strong interest in Ayurveda was renewed. At this point, scholars and spiritual teachers tried to pick up the pieces of this profound science. Schools re-opened and began to train Ayurvedic physicians. By the early 1990s there were several hundred small Ayurvedic schools in India.

Even so, India is a vast country, and the number of Ayurvedic practitioners relative to the population is very small. As of today, Ayurveda remains subordinated to the western-influenced health care system.

In the West, a great interest in the science of Ayurveda began to emerge as westerners started to question the tenets of their own health care system. In the mid-1980s, profound writers like Dr. Deepak Chopra and Dr. Vasant Lad, along with Dr. David Frawley and the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, began to enlighten readers and listeners about this ancient wisdom. Interest mushroomed, and now we see the very first Ayurvedic Colleges opening in the United States, offering formal study of this ancient knowledge.

Ayurveda is a science that is, first and foremost, about creating harmony with one's environment. Ayurveda teaches us that when we live in harmony we shall be healthy, and that disease is the normal expression of living out of harmony. Hence, Ayurveda is a health care discipline that begins by asking us to look inside of ourselves so that we may discover how we are living out of harmony. Only then can we make the life changes necessary for healing to take place.

In this way, Ayurveda gives us back both responsibility for our well being as well as the power to create our state of health. Ayurveda teaches us that we are all unique individuals and that each individual's path toward perfect health is equally unique. Ayurveda is not a dogma of "how to"; rather it is a system that illuminates our unique journey and helps to guide us to our destination.

Ayurveda utilizes diet, herbs, aromas, colors, meditation and yoga, along with special cleansing techniques known as Pancha Karma^[2], to assist each person in his or her process. Most importantly, however, Ayurveda helps each person to look at their lifestyle and discover areas that are disharmonious, while at the same time empowering greater harmony. Ayurveda says that where there is harmony, there is health.

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