

Āyurveda & Yoga – A Series on Āyurveda 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 many more avenues through which one can explore and learn about the form of holistic medicine known as Āyurveda.

Traditionally Āyurveda and Yoga went hand in hand, so for students of Yoga an understanding of Āyurveda will complement and help their Yoga study and practice.

Furthermore in the application of Yoga as a therapy (cikitsa) an understanding of Āyurveda 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 Āyurveda.

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 or, as is being shown by more recent research, absorbing influences from other parts of the world so they become as if part of its own traditional roots.

This is why, to appreciate Yoga, it is helpful to know something about India and its historical, cultural, religious, and philosophical background.

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.

1. The Veda – The relationship between the world, soul and god.

The first is the Veda, 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 relationship between the Psyche (Citta) and Awareness (Cit)

The second facet of the jewel is Yoga. Yoga is a means by which we can keep the psyche (citta), and therefore ultimately the mind and body, free from those patterns which lead to dis-ease (Duḥkha) and diffuse our psychic energies.

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

3. Āyurveda

The third facet to this view is that of Āyurveda. Āyurveda 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 Āyurveda. Subsequent articles will look in more detail at concepts that are seen as integral to both Āyurveda and Yoga.

Āyurveda 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 Āyurveda, suggest that the Yoga student of the time had an understanding of how the principles of Āyurveda were applied.

Certainly the great masters of the Yoga tradition understood Āyurveda and applied its teaching when working with the needs of the individual student.

We can see from references in texts like the Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā that the principles of Āyurveda were understood and applied in influencing the constitutional matrix of students.

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā C2 v50

kapālaśodhanaṃ vātadoṣaghnaṃ kṛmidoṣahṛt |

In describing the benefits of the prāṇāyāma technique Sūrya Bedhana, we are told it cleanses the nasal cavities and influences imbalances of the vāta doṣa or the principle of air in the energetic aspect of the human system.

Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā C2 v58

gulmaphlīhādikān rogān jvaraṃ pittaṃ kṣudhāṃ tṛṣāṃ |

In describing the benefits of the prāṇāyāma technique Śītalī we are told it can help reduce swelling, overactivity of the spleen, fever and imbalances of the pitta doṣa or the principle of fire in the energetic aspect of the human system.

In describing the benefits of the prāṇāyāma technique Bhastrika we are told that it reduces excesses in the tridoṣa, three principles of vāta, pitta and śleṣma (kapha) or the principles of air, fire, and water as well as increasing the gastric fire (agni) in the energetic aspect of the human system.

The use of concepts like Tridoṣa, or three Principles of Vāta, Pitta and Śleṣma (Kapha) when referring to effects or purpose of techniques show clearly they were understood and applied when working with student's particular constitutional matrix.

The next article will explore these three primary energetic concepts in detail.

Āyurveda and the Individual

According to Āyurveda everybody's constitutional matrix is unique in its balance of form and energy. This is the result of genetic and other environmental influences that leave us as individuals within a larger social group. This means that a person must be seen as an individual in terms of their body, finer energy, persona and psyche.

This insight is still being reflected in the teaching of great ācārya (spiritual teacher) such as T Krishnamacharya whose lineage extends back to his 9th century forebear Nathamuni.

Krishnamacharya's teaching showed great insight into all the three facets mentioned earlier, that of spirit, mind and body. Living a long life, having a body free from disease and a mind that remains clear and sharp were of prime importance in the awakening of spiritual experience.

So what is Āyurveda?

Āyurveda is one of the world's oldest healing systems; it is said to have starting developing from as long 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.

Āyurveda was said to have evolved through the Ṛṣi or Seers of India. These Ṛṣi came to the conclusion that we needed to relate better to the world. In order to do this we needed to be physically healthy, energetically sound and with clearer minds.

They explored the problem through deep reflection and from this enquiry Āyurveda evolved. The more they reflected the more they saw the innate connection between the plants, the animals, man, and the social and climatic environment. For example 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 Āyurveda.

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

Life means health; this encompasses physical health (annamaya), energetic health (prāṇamaya), mental health (manomaya), intellectual health (vijñānamaya), and emotional health (ānandamaya).

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 Āyurveda have evolved to help develop or maintain whole health.

Āyurveda concentrates more on physical and energetic health, Yoga more on mental, intellectual and emotional health. Unless the body is physically and energetically healthy all attempts at developing a strong mental capability or trying to cultivate the space for awareness will be hampered.

Health as Harmony

The Physical body needs to be in harmony with its surroundings. Āyurveda tells us we need to understand our individuality and our place in the Universe. In learning how we can live more harmoniously we can integrate the effects (dis-ease) of diseases with less psychic disturbance. Because where there is dis-ease of the body there is dis-ease of the mind (duḥkha).

So in talking about harmony or health of the body Āyurveda means harmony or health of the psyche. Harmony of the mind is something we need to have to live more skilfully. It is a rhythm we need to have when moving from one cycle to the next whether it be from one season to the next, or one stage of life to the next.

Harmony as Flow

If you appreciate the rhythmic aspects of nature (prakṛti) you can flow along more easily with the laws of the universe (ṛtam).

Although Āyurveda says disease is inevitable, the relationship with the rhythm you have cultivated will help keep you freer from the effects of disease. So the health of your relationship with the flow of nature will determine the quality of your relationship with the flow of your own life.

Āyurveda is the understanding of the flow of nature, the understanding of the flow of cosmic life, of earthly life and 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 end of this particular cycle of life, as for any other aspect of nature.

We need to know how to measure, to understand, and how to use the flow to sustain our well-being. This is why Āyurveda means knowledge of life, the science of understanding or gaining insight into the flow of life.

The Flow of Prāṇa

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 Prāṇa, the word means "that which flows everywhere".

A later article will explore Prāṇa in much more detail and its its relevance in understanding the basic energetic concepts called the Tridoṣa in Āyurveda.

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