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## Review article

## A glimpse of Ayurveda – The forgotten history and principles of Indian traditional medicine



Yogini S. Jaiswal, Leonard L. Williams\*

Center for Excellence in Post-Harvest Technologies, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, North Carolina Research Campus, Kannapolis, NC 28081, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Ayurveda is considered as one of the oldest of the traditional systems of medicine (TSMs) accepted worldwide. The ancient wisdom in this traditional system of medicine is still not exhaustively explored. The junction of the rich knowledge from different traditional systems of medicine can lead to new avenues in herbal drug discovery process. The lack of the understanding of the differences and similarities between the theoretical doctrines of these systems is the major hurdle towards their convergence apart from the other impediments in the discovery of plant based medicines. This review aims to bring into limelight the age old history and the basic principles of Ayurveda. This would help the budding scholars, researchers and practitioners gain deeper perspicuity of traditional systems of medicine, facilitate strengthening of the commonalities and overcome the challenges towards their global acceptance and harmonization of such medicinal systems.

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## 1. Introduction

Ayurveda is one of the most renowned traditional systems of medicine that has survived and flourished from ages till date. With the enormous knowledge of nature based medicine, the relationship of human body constitution and function to nature and the elements of the universe that act in coordination and affect the living beings, this system will continue to flourish in ages still to come. There are many avenues still to be explored by the researchers, practitioners and experts in the field who carry the responsibility of keeping the traditional systems of medicine (TSMs) alive and contributing to their growth in the future. However, due to many barriers such as lack of literature sources in different languages and insufficiency of awareness about the basic principles and histories of the systems from different ethnic origins, there is a lacuna of exchange of information from systems around the globe.

Knowledge of systems from different ethnic origins would bring about interchange of knowledge and increase the understanding of different systems, and this can ultimately contribute to integration and advancement of herbal drug research when accompanied by collaborative work of researchers from different countries. These futuristic goals can be accomplished when one gains insights about the systems, the principles and histories and works upon the strengthening aspects common between the various TSMs. In this review, we have made an attempt to put forth the basic principles of doctrine and history of Ayurveda to contribute to the above said perspectives.

To date, there have been several reviews detailing Ayurveda. However, very few reviews detail the modalities of the basic principles and history of Ayurveda.<sup>1</sup> Through this review the authors wish to provide the readers an understanding of the age old history and the basic principles of Ayurveda.

## 2. History of Ayurveda

Ayurveda has an age old history since the 2nd Century BC. Ayurveda has its foundations laid by the ancient schools of Hindu Philosophical teachings named *Vaisheshika* and the school of logic named as *Nyaya*. It is also related to the manifestation framework,

\* Corresponding author. Center for Excellence in Post-Harvest Technologies, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, North Carolina Research Campus, 500 Laureate Way, Kannapolis, NC 28081, USA. Tel.: +1 704 250 5700x5703; fax: +1 704 250 5709.

E-mail address: [llw@ncat.edu](mailto:llw@ncat.edu) (L.L. Williams).

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well-known as *Samkhya*, and it was established in the same period when schools of *Nyaya* and *Vaisheshika* flourished.

The *Vaisheshika* School preached about inferences and perceptions that should be obtained about a patient's pathological condition for treatment. Whereas, *Nyaya* school propagated its teachings on the basis that one should have an extensive knowledge of the patient's condition, and the disease condition before proceeding for treatment. The school of *Vaisheshika*, classifies the attributes of any object into six types: substance, particularity, activity, generality, inherence and quality called as *Dravya*, *Vishesh*, *Karma*, *Samanya*, *Samavaya* and *Guna* respectively, in Sanskrit language.<sup>2,3</sup> Later, *Vaisheshika* and *Nyaya* schools worked together and jointly founded the *nyāya–vaiśeṣika* school. The *nyāya–vaiśeṣika* school, in the later years brought glory to the ancient knowledge and helped in disseminating the knowledge about Ayurveda. Even before these schools were established and also today, the origin of Ayurveda is considered to be divine, from the Hindu God, Brahma who is called as the creator of the universe.<sup>4,5</sup> It is believed that the creator of the universe passed on this holistic knowledge of healing onto the sages for the well-being of mankind. From the sages the knowledge of traditional medicines was passed on to the disciples and then to the common man by various writings and oral narrations. The information about the healing properties of the herbs was composed in the form of poems, called "*Shlokas*". These were used by sages to describe the use of medicinal plants. The Hindu system of healing is believed to be based on four eminent compilations of knowledge (*Vedas*) called as *Yajur Veda*, *Rig Veda*, *Sam Veda*, and *Atharva Veda*. The *Rig Veda* is the most well-known of all the four Vedas and describes 67 plants and 1028 Shlokas. The *Atharva Veda* and *Yajur Veda* describe 293 and 81 medicinally useful plants. The practice of Ayurveda is based upon the knowledge gained from these Vedas. The writings in *Rig Veda* and *Atharva Veda* are attributed to "*Atreya*" who is believed to have been conferred with this knowledge from Lord *Indra*, who initially received it from Lord *Brahma*.<sup>6,7</sup> *Agnivesha* compiled the knowledge from the Vedas, and it was edited by Charaka and some other scholars and is presently called as "*Charaka Samhita*". *Charaka Samhita* describes all aspects of Ayurvedic medicine and *Sushruta Samhita* describes the Science of Surgery.<sup>8–11</sup> Both these legendary compilations are still used by practitioners of traditional medicine. These ancient texts are available in various translations and languages like Tibetan, Greek, Chinese, Arabic and Persian.<sup>12</sup> There are several other allied minor compilations like *Nighantu Granthas*, *Madhava Nidana* and *Bhava Prakasha* from the contributions of various scholars, however *Charaka Samhita* is the most respected of all the records.<sup>13,14</sup>

### 3. Basic doctrine principles of Ayurveda

Ayurveda believes that the entire universe is composed of five elements: Vayu (Air), Jala (Water), Akash (Space or ether), Prithvi (Earth) and Teja (Fire). These five elements (referred to as *Pancha Mahabhoota* in Ayurveda) are believed to form the three basic humors of human body in varying combinations. The three humors; *Vata dosha*, *Pitta dosha* and *Kapha dosha* are collectively called as "*Tridoshas*" and they control the basic physiological functions of the body along with five sub-doshas for each of the principal doshas. Ayurveda believes that the human body consists of *Saptadhatu* (seven tissues) *Rasa* (tissue fluids), *Meda* (fat and connective tissue), *Rakta* (blood), *Asthi* (bones), *Majja* (marrow), *Mamsa* (muscle), and *Shukra* (semen) and three *Malas* (waste products) of the body, viz. *Purisha* (faeces), *Mutra* (urine) and *Sweda* (sweat). *Vata dosha* maintains the cellular transport, electrolyte balance, elimination of waste products and its effect is increased by dryness. *Pitta dosha* regulates the body temperature, optic nerve coordination and

hunger and thirst management. Heat conditions of the body aggravate *Pitta*. *Kapha dosha* is increased due to sweet and fatty food and it provides lubrication to the joints for proper functioning. The catabolism of the body is believed to be governed by *Vata*, metabolism by *Pitta* and anabolism by *Kapha*.<sup>15</sup> For a healthy state of health, a balance between the three doshas and other factors should be maintained. Any imbalance between the three causes a state of illness or disease.<sup>16</sup> In Ayurveda it is believed, that a perfect balance between the nature elements and the Tridoshas of the human body should be maintained for a healthy state of living by following the principles of divine wisdom.<sup>17</sup> The body is believed to be composed of seven types of tissues called as "*Sapta Dhatus*". These seven tissues work in coordination with each for proper physiological functioning of the human body. The *Rakta Dhātu* resembles the blood and regulates the circulation of blood cells and provision of blood components to the body. The *Mamsa Dhātu* (Muscle tissue) provides supports in the form of skeletal muscles for the *Meda Dhātu* (adipose fat). The *Asthi Dhātu* comprises the bones of the body and the *Majja Dhātu* is made up of the bone marrow and fluids required for the oleation of the bones and their functioning. The *Shukra Dhātu* is responsible for functions of the reproductive organs of the body.

Apart from the Doshas and the Dhatus, the other important factors considered in the doctrine of Ayurveda are the *Tri Malas* and *Trayo Dosa Agni*. *Tri Malas* are the three types of waste products formed in the body due to metabolic and digestive functions of the body. They comprise of the *Mutra* (urine), *Purisha* (faeces), and *Sweda* (sweat). Ayurveda explains that if the balance between Tridosha is not maintained the waste products of the body are not effectively eliminated and these lead to further complications like diarrhea, constipation, asthma, rheumatoid arthritis and such other complications. If the *Mutra Mala* (urine) is not removed from the body, it can lead to urinary tract infections, cystitis and gastric pain. If the *Sweda Mala* is not cleared from the body, it can lead to skin irritation problems, and improper fluid balance. As per the principles of Ayurveda the biological fire of the body for all the metabolic function is called as "*Agni*". There are thirteen categories of *Agni* in a human body and the most important is the one responsible for digestive fire, called as *Jatharagni*. *Jatharagni* has a close relation with *Pitta* and ultimately *Vatta* of the body. If the digestive fire of the body is increased in the body by increase in acidity conditions, the elevation in *Pitta* levels and its relative symptoms are observed. Digestive fire is important in controlling the normal microflora, proper digestive functions and provision of energy to the entire body. Any disturbances in its balance, creates discomfort to the gastro-intestinal tract and results in pathological complications like ulcers, diarrhea and constipation.<sup>18</sup>

Considering the bodily constitution, pathological history, the Dosha characteristics, life style and environmental conditions in an individual's routine life style, Ayurveda has many treatment strategies for promoting well-being to individuals.<sup>19,20</sup>

*Ayurveda* employs the "*Pancha karma*" method in its therapies. *Pancha karma* therapy applies various processes for the rejuvenation of the body, cleansing and enhancing longevity. The *Pancha karma* is composed of five karmas (actions) that are used for removal of toxins from the body tissues. They are the *Virechan* (purgation through use powders, pastes or decoction), *Vaman* (forced therapeutic emesis by use of some medicines), *Basti* (use of enemas prepared from medicated oils), *Rakta moksha* (detoxification of blood) and *Nasya* (administration of medicines like decoctions, oils and fumes through nasal route).

Primarily, *Pancha karma* consists of 3 steps viz. *Poorva karma* (preparatory process of the body for the therapy), *Pradhan karma* (the main process of therapy) and the *Paschat karma* (consisting of regimens to be followed to restore digestive and other absorptive

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