

History of Ayurveda

Ayurveda is made of two words *Ayu + Veda*, 'Ayu' means life and 'Veda' means knowledge, and together it means knowledge of life or science of living healthy life.

Aim

The main goal of ayurveda is to maintain good health and if a person gets sick then to cure the disease. It is a holistic science as it considers all aspects like body, mind, senses as well as the lifestyle.

History

Ayurveda theory evolved from a deep understanding of nature. The great rishis or seers of ancient India came to understand creation through deep meditation and other spiritual practices. These rishis came to understand the deeper truths of human physiology and health. They observed the fundamentals of life, organized them into an elaborate system, and compiled India's philosophical and spiritual texts, called 'Vedas' the sacred books of knowledge.

Ayurveda was first recorded in the Vedas, the world's oldest existing literature which date back to 4000 BC. The words of the Vedas were carefully memorized according to metrical chants and transmitted from generation to generation. Thus the four Vedas have come down to us through several thousand years of oral transmission before being recorded in writing.

The four Vedas are

1. Rig Veda

2. Sama Veda

3. Yajur Veda

4. Atharva Veda

Out of four Vedas, the fourth Veda i.e. the Atharva -Veda is the earliest record of medical knowledge during the Vedic period. Therefore Ayurveda is sometimes called as a sub-branch of Atharva -Veda. It contains many hymns, prayers, and charms for the treatment of diseases to be used with herbal medicines. Most of the Vedic healing verses occur in the Atharva -Veda. Over 100 of its hymns are devoted to conditions like fever, leprosy, heart disease, headache, rheumatism, epilepsy etc. Natural forces like the sun and water and human skills were all used therapeutically in the Vedic era. Basic eight branches of Ayurveda have are documented in Atharva Veda.

These Ayurvedic teachings were customarily passed on orally from teacher to student for centuries. The knowledge of Ayurveda was recorded in Sanskrit, the ancient language of India.

Ayurveda greatly influenced health care practices in the east and the west. By 400 AD Ayurvedic works were translated into Chinese; by 700 AD Chinese scholars were studying medicine in India at Nalanda University. Chinese medicine, herbology and Buddhist philosophy were also greatly impacted by Ayurvedic knowledge.

The Rig-Veda, the oldest of the four Vedas also contains many concepts of Ayurveda. Its three great Gods- *Indra, Agni and Soma* are related to the three biological humors of Ayurveda - Vata - Pitta and Kapha. References are found in it to organ transplants, in the case of an artificial limb that was made for Queen *Vishpala*, wife of King *Khela*. The Rig-Veda also contains many hymns to soma rasa, as a great curative herbal preparation used to treat many diseases of body and mind and to promote longevity.

Lord Dhanvantari



Lord Dhanvantari is considered as the deity of Ayurveda who is considered an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Kashiraj Divodas King of Varanasi, who devoted his entire life for the development of surgical branch of Ayurveda is also considered as reincarnation of Lord Dhanvantari. All

Ayurvedic physicians pray to God Dhanvantari on the auspicious day of 'Dhanatrayodashi' the second day of Diwali Festival in India. It is believed that Dhanvantari gives them the power to heal others.

Historical Development

As per the scriptures, long ago three scientists were chosen to learn the knowledge of Ayurveda. These three scientists were *Atreya, Kashyapa and Dhanvantari*.

Atreya mainly studied the science of medicine,
Kashyapa learned gynecology and pediatrics, and
Dhanvantari mastered the science of surgery.

Atreya had six main disciples *Agnivesha, Bhela, Jatukarna, Parashara, Harita and Ksharapani*, while *Dhanvantari* had eight disciples -*Sushruta, Aupadhaneva, Vaitarana, Aurabhra, Paushkalavata, Karavirya, Gopurarakshita and Bhoja*. *Kashyapa* had also many disciples.

Most of these disciples wrote different texts on their own branch of Ayurvedic medicine. However, *Charaka, Sushruta and Kashyapa's* texts are considered the most useful compendiums. These are known as **Samhita** or compilations.

The *Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita* and *Vagbhata or Ashtanga Sangraha*, are known as '**Brihat Trayi**' or three important texts.

The magical and religious aspect of medicine in the Vedas was gradually replaced by observations based on scientific thinking. Ayurvedic scholars from subsequent generations gave a sound and logical groundings in philosophy to Ayurveda. The materials scattered in the Vedas were collected, tested and systematically arranged. *Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridaya Samhita*, The great trio -the *Brihatrayi* as they are called - has enjoyed much popularity and respect for the last two thousand years. Although these texts have undergone some modification by various authors in subsequent periods, their present form is at least 1200 years old. They are all in the Sanskrit language. Students who then transmitted this information orally to other disciples recorded instructions.

The six disciples of *Atreya*, who developed the school of medicine (*Atreya Sampradaya*), namely *Agnivesha, Bhela, Jatukarna, Parashara, Harita and Ksharapani* wrote their own separate texts. Of these the *Agnivesha Samhita* was well accepted. This was revised, edited and supplemented, about 800 years later by *Charaka*.

The school of surgeons (*Dhanvantari Sampradaya*) had its six disciples - *Aupadhenava, Vaitarana, Aurabhra, Paushkalavata, Gopurarakshita, and Sushruta*. The **Sushruta Samhita** written by *Sushruta* is based on knowledge transmitted to him by *Divodas Dhanvantari*. It is

believed that *Indra* taught this knowledge to *Divodas Dhanvantari*, at the beginning of the *arsha* period. In the next era, 1000 - 700 BC. Ayurveda developed 8 recognized branches or specialties (*Ashtanga Ayurveda*).

Ayurveda and Buddhism

During the period 323 B.C.-642 A. D. in which Buddhism was popular in India, Ayurveda was well practiced by both Hindus and Buddhists. Valuable additions were made to its literature. Most notable was a commentary on *Sushruta Samhita* by *Nagarjuna*, by one of the most famous sages in the *Mahayana* Buddhist tradition. Yet the most remarkable thing about this period was that organized efforts were made to make the science as publicly available as possible. Medicinal herbs were planted along the sides of streets to be used freely by all. Many Ayurveda hospitals were formed. The art of nursing, which was described by *Charaka*, was widely practiced and systematized.

Along with Buddhist missionaries, the knowledge of Ayurveda and of Indian culture spread beyond the boundaries of India. The great nations like Rome, Greece and China - were attracted to India and students came from these countries to learn the science and arts of the Ayurveda. The medical systems of the Greece and Rome bear clear signs of the influence of Ayurveda upon them. India was considered the seat of learning for the world and many philosophers and scholars visited India for study.

Nagarjuna laid the foundation of *Rasa Shastra*, the use of alchemical preparations. A number of pharmaceutical preparations of Rasa medicines, special preparation of mercury, sulfur and other minerals and certain poisonous substances (in purified forms) were introduced in the treatment of various diseases.

In the Buddhist period, medical relief and nursing was encouraged but the use of knife was discouraged, therefore surgery was neglected. Buddha stopped animal sacrifice for ethical reasons and did not permit animal dissection. He gave support and encouragement to medical research and for the establishment of health centers for animals as well as humans. Emperor *Ashoka*, who was a follower of Buddhism, established general hospitals as well as veterinary hospitals.

The Buddhists, who supported all forms of learning, set up many universities to teach Buddhism, Vedic lore and subjects like history, geography, Sanskrit literature, poetry, drama, grammar, law, philosophy, astrology, astronomy, mathematics, commerce and the art of war as well as medicine. The most famous of these universities was that of Nalanda, in Bihar, which was established during the fourth century AD and flourished until about the twelfth century. Other great universities were at Takshashila and Kashi.

Spread of Ayurveda in other countries

In the 3rd century BC, Ashoka, the emperor of most of northern India adapted Buddhism. He built various hospitals, including specialized surgical, obstetric and mental facilities, for both humans and animals. Buddhist missionaries were sent to many neighboring countries, like Sri Lanka, Burma, Thailand, and Indonesia etc. These emissaries spread Indian culture, religion and Ayurveda with them.

In 326 BC, Alexander the Great invaded northern India. Alexander was so impressed by Ayurvedic practitioners that he ordered all cases of poisoning to be treated by them. He carried some of these doctors away during his departure.

Decline of Ayurveda

The golden age ended when waves of Muslims invaded northern India between the 10th and 12th centuries. The Muslims slaughtered sages and monks as heathens, destroyed the universities and burned the libraries. Those who could escape fled to Nepal and to Tibet, where Ayurveda had first penetrated in the 8th century AD. Some Indian Ayurvedic texts are thus preserved today only in Tibetan translation.

These Muslim invaders brought with them their own physicians called 'Hakims' and Arabian system of medicine, which spread slowly throughout India during Muslim rule. Arabic physicians created Unani medicine. While the Muslim rulers supported Unani, Ayurveda was still practiced by many people. During the 16th century the Mogul emperor Akbar ordered the compilation of all Indian medical texts.

Beginning of British rule was another landmark in the decline of Ayurveda. The British not only denied state patronage to Ayurveda; they also showed a negative attitude towards this traditional medicine. The East India Company closed down existing Ayurveda schools at Calcutta in 1833. In 1835, the British prohibited to teach Ayurveda at Government medical colleges. Thus in the beginning of the century, there were no Ayurvedic teaching institutions, and all teaching of Ayurveda was at the level of guru-kula system. By the middle of the 19th century, Western medicine had become the sole recipient of the state patronage. Fortunately, in spite of suppression and the lack of patronage, Ayurveda continued to serve about 70% of the country.