

Ayurveda- Brief History and Philosophy

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Brief History:

Ayurveda is the oldest system among all life sciences, originated in India thousands of years ago. It is not easy to decide the exact period of its origin as this is not the work of a single person and of few years but of thousands of thinkers, philosophers and investigators through ages. Ayurveda is evolved from the quest to have a happy life, through a deep understanding of creation and its maintenance, perceived and conceived by the *Rishis* or seers of ancient India. They revealed the deepest truths related to human anatomy, physiology, psychology, health, diseases and their managements. In the propounders of Ayurveda, the wish to have healthy and happy life grew into the higher faculty of their consciousness. They knew that the protective power and device was ingrained in life itself. They observed and analyzed the events related to living beings at higher conscious level through their meditative practices. They could see with their higher senses, the measures and means that protected and relieved the human beings of ailments. The life- stream carries in its flow, a wisdom for its own support and protection that manifests through some enlightened persons during each cycle of time. Only in that sense Ayurveda can be said to have a beginning. Otherwise it is as beginning-less as life itself and runs parallel to it through all time.

First documentation of Ayurveda is found in the *Vedas*, the world's oldest existing literature. The exact period of *Vedas* is also not known because for an unknown period, the Vedic sciences have been communicated from generation to generation through verbal means. However historians believe that the period of documented literature falls between 2000 BC to 1000 BC. This was the period of sincere investigations, observations, and conclusions at higher conscious level by enlightened scholars and then to communicate them to suitable deserving disciples.

At the end of the Vedic period the progressive establishment of scientific Ayurveda began. There were conferences of *Rishis*, to discuss and exchange their experiences which they have made through sensory as well as extrasensory perceptions, finally to establish a well accepted principle scientifically. Minutes of these congresses are compiled in the form of *Samhitas*. Those are basis of Ayurvedic learnings and practice even today. *Carakasamhita*, *Susruta samhita* and *Astangahrdaya* are the most important and popular among these *samhitas*, those are compiled approximately between 1500 BC to 500 AD. In these texts all eight clinical branches of Ayurveda are described together with its fundamental principles.

3rd century onward, Ayurveda enjoyed a big revolution in the form of origin of *Rasashastra* (Alchemy). Use of mercury and several other minerals came in to practice. These have been used after certain difficult processing. Medicaments prepared through these techniques had several advantages over earlier ways of treatments. These have been fast but safe in action and much effective in very small doses. Even today these medicaments have very special place in Ayurvedic medical practice and often show miraculous results in difficult situations. In 16th Century, Paracelsus, practiced and propagated this system in Europe. This progress continued until the establishment of British rule in India. With the establishment of the British rule, the flow of western culture, science and medicine began. Patronized by the government, it put off all chances of development and evolution for the Indian sciences. Western medical education became dominant. At Government level, Ayurveda became a second-class option. However it has always been a primary health care system for more than eighty percent of the population, practiced traditionally in the families. In the latter days of British rule, Ayurveda had drawn the attention of the scholars in the country as well as abroad. Indologists of the west became interested in Ayurveda together with other sciences and philosophies documented in Sanskrit language. Same time a strong feeling for renaissance of Indian sciences grew with a patriotic and nationalistic spirit as part of India's freedom movement. As a result establishment of Ayurvedic Institutes and publication of books took place, however with a very slow pace and mostly without a Government support.

After India became independent in 1947, it found itself at the cross-roads. On one side, there was a tremendous attraction towards modernization and scientific as well as technological establishments in the hearts of the Indians desirous of fast advancement and equality with other nations of the world and on the other, there was also the strong attachment to the glorious past which was not clearly in accordance with what was now regarded as logical and valid. Not that it is irrational, but its rationale is beyond the understanding of contemporary scientific thinking. We are today facing a world, steeped in the spirit of science which is analytical in method and verifiable by laboratory methods alone and which is not willing to any theory that cannot be put into the test tube and shown though it may be proved valid in its outcomes. Ayurveda gradually gained ground and new institutes began to be established. Today more than 250 Ayurvedic colleges, research centers and several hundred hospitals have been established. Interest in Ayurveda in the West began in the mid 1970's as Ayurvedic teachers from India began visiting the United States and Europe.

Philosophical background:

We find in the history that Ayurveda is not originated and developed as separate independent system. This has been a part of evolution of knowledge concerned about wellbeing of all beings and to enjoy ecstasy of ultimate truth. Vedic philosophies are the result of these quests. Ayurveda is a practical integration of important Vedic philosophical systems i.e. *Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya* and *Vaisheshika*, amalgamated intelligently with excellent measures of health care.

Definition of Ayurveda:

'*Ayurveda*' is generally understood as 'Science of life' translating '*Ayuh* (r)' as life and '*Veda*' as science. However the word 'science' in its conventional meaning is not an appropriate equivalent for '*Veda*'.

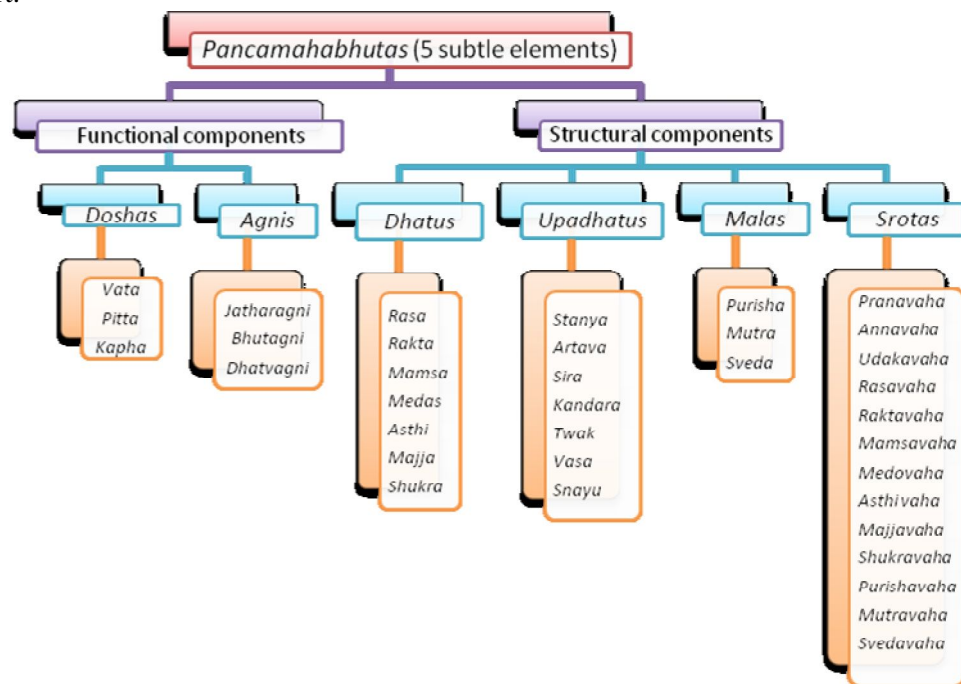
According to *Caraka samhita* (an ancient treatise on Ayurveda), Ayurveda is the science that defines *Ayuh* i.e. life ; describes measurements of life and its components ; explains about lives advantageous or disadvantageous for other lives and life in general ; that defines happy and unhappy life and suggests what is good and what is bad for life . (*Ca. Su. 1/41*) This shows that Ayurveda emphasizes upon life in general with bit more emphasis on human life being the best among all the creatures. Welfare of every individual is always included in welfare of life in general while a segregated approach aimed on individual's welfare, cannot lead to welfare of any being. Thus Ayurveda is not only a science of medicine but it includes several other academic disciplines of modern time e. g. sociology, economics, and ecology and so on.

What is life?

Life is not mere a biochemical or biophysical phenomenon but a manifestation of union of soul, mind and body those are integral and interdependent components of life. Action and *Chetana* (closest equivalent is consciousness) are the essential characteristics of life. Soul provides *Chetana* (consciousness) while mind initiates action and these characteristics manifest in body which neither possesses *neither Chetana* nor an action.

All material forms including body is composed of *Pancamahabhutas* (five subtle elements) namely *Prithivi* (earth), *Jala* (water), *Agni* (fire), *Vayu*(air) and *Akasha* (ether/space). These should not be misconceived with popular expressions of earth etc. These are different entities with similar nomenclature. The earth element represents mass in the material. Water provides the capacity of union of more than one principle. Fire provides heat which remains always in latent form with every material phenomenon. Air provides movements and ether provides space. Every material phenomenon no matter how small it is; is composed of these elements. Smallest particle even in its subatomic form possesses some mass that is because of earth element. It has a tendency to remain united with others that is because of water element. Latent heat with such particle, which comes out during its action is result of fire element. This remains always in some motion, which is characteristic of air element. This particle is surrounded by some space which is ether element.

These elements constitute different functional and structural constituents of the body. This can be seen in following chart:



Dhatu: These are basic essential structural components namely *Rasa* (plasma, leucocytes and thrombocytes), *Rakta* (Red blood cells), *Mamsa* (muscle tissue), *Medas* (fat tissue), *Majja* (marrow and brain), *Shukra* (male reproductive substances).

Upadhatus: These are secondary essential structural components namely *Stanya* (lactation), *Artava* (female reproductive substances), *Sira* (blood vessels), *Kandara* (tendons), *Twak* (skin), *Vasa* (muscle fat), *Snayu* (ligaments and nerves). Main difference between *Dhatu* and *Upadhatus* is this that former can be transformed into other form while later are not transformed.

Malas: These are the waste or non essential substances produced as a result of digestive and metabolic activities. Three main *Malas* are *Purisha* (faeces), *Mutra* (urine) and *Sveda* (sweat).

Srotas: These are the spaces where the substances are transported or exchanged. These may be very gross, very small, of varying shapes. All the vessels, hollow spaces, tubular structures and all extra and intracellular spaces are the *Srotas*. The *Srotas* may be innumerable but for practical purposes. Thirteen types of *Srotas* have been emphasized. Seven *Srotas* are meant to transport seven *Dhatu*s, those are in transforming phase. Three are meant to transport three *Malas*. Remaining three are for *Prana* (respiration), *Anna* (food) and *Udaka* (water).

Agni: This is an important principle responsible for digestion of food and transformation of *Dhatu*s. This principle acts at three levels and therefore described as three types

First type *Jatharagni* acts for initial digestion of food. Second type *Bhutagni* acts after initial digestion to separate five elemental fractions in the food. This again has five subtypes according to five elements. e.g. *Prthivyagni* for earth element and so on. After this, food is transformed into *Rasa dhatu*. Later seven *Dhatvagnis* (each in every *dhatu* viz. *Rasagni*, *Raktagni*, *Mamsagni*, *Medogni*, *Asthyagni*, *Majjagni* and *Sukragni*) act in their turn to transform *dhatu*s into next *dhatu*s. The ultimate product in the process is 'Ojas', the vital essence or sustainer of the life. During this process some byproducts and wastes are also produced those have significant role in health as well as disease.

Doshas:

These three principles namely *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* are most important phenomena in Ayurveda, as these produce good and ill effects on the entire system depending on their normal or abnormal state.

Vata: This is kinetic principle, responsible for all the movements in body. The word *Vata* has its origin from Sanskrit root 'Va' denoting movements. This principle is characterized by lightness, dryness, roughness, non-sliminess, coldness, mobility and fineness. Thus it produces and maintains these qualities in body. When provoked it abnormally increases these qualities to cause a disease. It performs respiration, body movements, circulation, excretion sensations (conveying the sensory impulses), speech, foetal developments and all others that require any kind of movement. Though *Vata* is active throughout the body, but at certain regions in the body its actions are prominent such as colon and low back. These regions are known as its seat.

Pitta: This is a thermal principle. The word *Pitta* gets its origin from Sanskrit root 'Tapa' denoting, 'heat'. This is characterized by slight oiliness or moisture, heat, liquidity, sourness, pungentness and sharpness. Thus in its normal state this produces and maintains these qualities in the body. When provoked it causes abnormal increase in these qualities and produce a disease. *Pitta* is responsible for digestion, catabolism, energy, heat, vision, valour, anger, hunger, thirst and intelligence. Its activities are prominent in stomach, intestine and umbilical region.

Kapha: This is a hydroic and uniting principle originated from Sanskrit root 'Ka' denoting 'water'. *Shleshma* another synonym of this is originated from Sanskrit root 'Shlish' denoting 'embracing'. This is characterized by oiliness, coldness, heaviness, sweetness, stability, sliminess or stickiness and softness. Thus in its normal state it produces and maintains these qualities in the body and when provoked it may cause abnormal increase in these qualities and may produce a disease. It is responsible for anabolism, strength, potency, stability, lubrication, nourishment, tolerance and contentment. Its activities are prominent in chest, throat, head, joints and upper stomach.

Concept of Prakriti:

The concept of *Prakriti* helps to explain why people react differently to the same stimulus. There are seven types of *Prakriti* based on predominance of any of these *Doshas*. *Prakriti* is constituted as the result of inherent traits from parents as well as food and behavior of mother during pregnancy. Physico-psychological set up of an individual is governed by this constitutional type throughout his life.

Concept of health and disease:

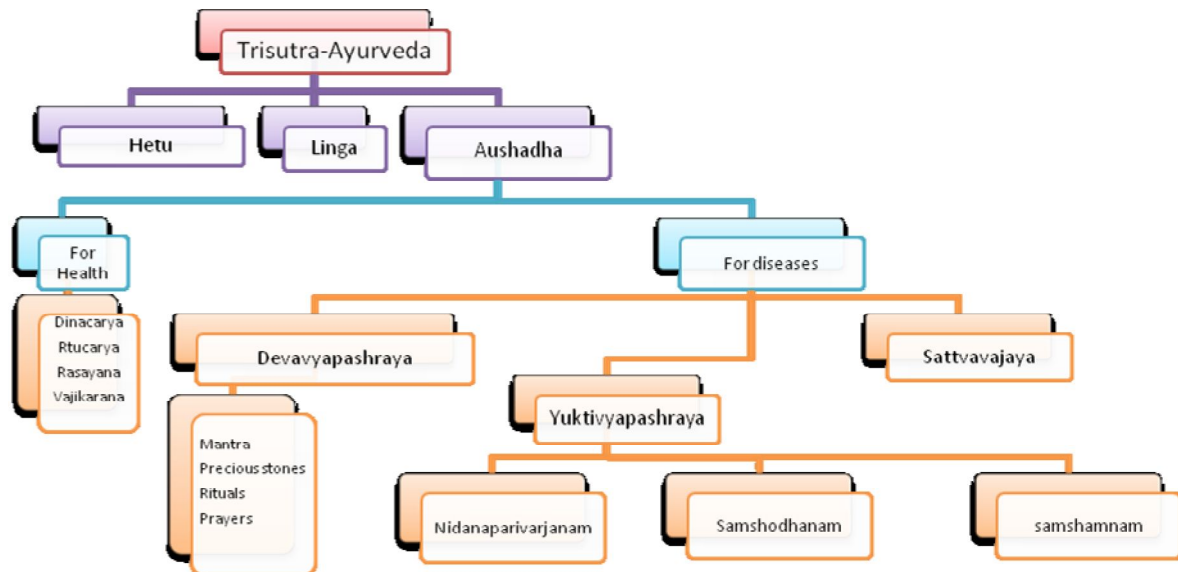
Health and disease are defined in a very special way in Ayurveda. For Ayurveda, health is not merely an absence of disease. Ayurvedic expression for healthy state is 'Swasthya', a Sanskrit word composed of two basic words viz. 'Swa' and 'Stha' denoting 'self' and 'to remain or to stay' respectively. Thus 'Swasthya' denotes one that stays withinself. Life is manifestation of interdependent union of soul (the self); mind and body. Body and mind are prone to sufferings, while soul is always free from that. Thus among these three levels only the level of soul can be synonymous of health. When one enjoys this level he enjoys absolute health and happiness. Health is combination of equilibrium of *Doshas* (functional principles); normal state of *Dhatus* (body tissues), *Malas* (excreta) and *Agni* (principles responsible for digestion and metabolism); normalcy of *Indriyas* (sensory and motor faculties); clarity and pleasure of mind; and pleasure of soul (a state of absolute pleasure unaffected by a loss or a gain). To achieve this ideal state of health may be difficult but not impossible. Sincere efforts in this direction may certainly bring one closer and closer to the goal.

Another expression for health is *Prakriti*, denoting a natural state. Until one remains in his natural state, he is healthy, and he enjoys this until he falls in *Vikriti*. i.e. diseased state as a result of contact with any *Hetu* (etiological factor).

Trisutra Ayurveda:

Ayurveda has two main medical objectives- 1. Prevention and health –promotion of healthy individuals. 2. Treatment of diseased ones. To attain these objectives, a practitioner of Ayurveda has to learn Ayurveda consisting of three main divisions of descriptions (*Trisutram*) viz. *Hetu* (etiology) *Linga* (symptomatology) and *Aushadha* (knowledge of therapeutics) is dedicated to a healthy as well as a diseased for their wellbeing. Ayurveda describes causes of health, symptoms of health and measures

to maintain and promote health together with causes, symptoms and treatments of diseases in general and in particular.



Hetu (Etiological factors):

Classically, the main etiological factors are the result of improper application of intelligence, inappropriate use of the sensory faculties and disturbed qualities of the seasons.

Aushadha:

Aushadha denotes therapeutic measures. These measures again are divided into two categories. First includes the measures for healthy individual to maintain his health while second includes the measures for a diseased to rescue him from his disease. Ayurveda emphasizes first upon prevention and then early treatment of the diseases.

Measures to maintain and promote health

These measures include:

1. *Dinacharya* (Daily routines)
2. *Ritucharya* (Seasonal regimen)
3. *Rasayana* (Anti-aging measures)
4. *Vajikarana* (Measures to improve quality of reproductive functions).

Dinacharya and *Ritucharya* are emphasized here because of their practical importance.

Dinacharya:

This is an important component of the health care measures. In modern time man has utilized his whole intellectual capacity to find out every possible measure for his comfort. He found out the means to save the time that he is able to complete a year's work in hours or even minutes. But unfortunately with all these time saver means he is not able to spare some time for his health care. Principles of Ayurvedic *Dinacharya* are based on certain comprehensible logics. Like other living beings man is also part of this cosmos. All the activities of the universe run according to certain preset programs. We hardly can find a lapse in these programs and the coordinated activities. Every being has to act as a part of this whole machinery. Usually all the living beings follow the natural laws. Only man does not obey them. If some part of a machine fails in working in coordination with other parts, it causes severe damage to the machine together with that part. Ayurvedic *Dinacharya* is meant to act according to cosmic rhythm and in coordination with other beings. Sometimes there are some

arguments against *Dinacharya* that this is difficult to adopt routines of some very different culture. Here we have to realize facts about concept of culture. Culture is result of collective behavior of certain society and is never fixed for all the time. This is always in the process of reforming. Man continuously makes changes in any cultural setup according to his interests, needs, beliefs and circumstances. Therefore we can see fast integration of different cultures throughout the world. Unfortunately concept of holistic health has very least place in these cultural integrations. If one is determined to adopt healthy daily routines, there cannot be any hurdle in that.

Dinacharya means to live in a regular and natural rhythm of life and includes timely rest, timely and within the capacity work, timely sleep, timely waking, timely and right food, non-suppression of natural urges and well balanced emotional behavior. To act against these rules is cause of diseases.

Diet is very important aspect of *Dinacharya* and is a special concept of Ayurveda. According to Ayurveda, wholesome or a good food is only factor to cause normal development in body. Human body is produced of food and also gets its growth and maintenance through food. Wholesome food is cause of an excellence in health. Contrary to this unwholesome is responsible for origin of disease. When Ayurveda talks about wholesome, its criteria for wholesome are not based on the principles of carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins and minerals. Ayurvedic criteria are based on our own natural perceptions. How do animals decide their food? They do not have any laboratory to test chemical composition and toxicity of grass, leaves, fruits, or the different fleshes. They judge the food with the help of their own perceptions. They still possess this strong perceptive faculty in themselves while we are gradually losing it because of our growing dependence on laboratories. Ayurveda has developed the wisdom of dietetics on the basis of these natural perceptions at different levels of our sensorium. When we put a piece of some food article it gives some feelings in the mouth, on the tongue together with some feeling at mental levels. This is the first perceptive level giving us several information about food and is very important level. This perception is known as '*Rasa*' or the taste.

As far food is concerned Ayurveda has emphasized much on *Rasa* (the taste), being very simple perception but able to provide very important clues about contents and quality of food.

Not only this is important that what do we eat but this is similarly important that when and how we eat. Body has its biological clock. Body is not ready to perform any activity at any time. Ayurveda has categorized the function and classified them according to biological clock. For example morning time is period of *Kapha*, if we eat heavy food in breakfast, our stomach is not prepared to digest it properly and there are possibilities of production of some harmful products. Midday is period of *Pitta*, and body is prepared to digest any kind of food properly. In the evening again there is period of *Kapha* and *Srotas* act sluggishly in the night, our supper should be light. There is a popular saying in Europe that "Eat like a king in a breakfast, like a farmer in the lunch and like a beggar in the supper." Unfortunately this saying is misinterpreted. I interpret that kings do not eat much, so we have to consider the amount of food in the breakfast with that. Farmers are hard workers, they need a good amount of food and that kind of amount is good for lunch.

This is not possible to explain all the rules pertaining to dietetics; few most essential useful aspects are highlighted here. Ayurveda emphasizes on selection of food according to *Prakriti* (innate predominance of *Doshas* in individual's constitution). Usually people ignore this knowingly and unknowingly. If a person with *Vata- Kapha* dominance consumes food with pro- *Vata- Kapha* properties, he will be prone to have diseases of *Vata Kapha* origin, for example, Asthma. If he avoids this type of food, he may protect himself from Asthma. A person with *Kapha* dominance, if consumes *Pro- Kapha* food, he may suffer with *Kapha* type diseases as Diabetes mellitus or Atherosclerosis.

Ayurveda recommends avoiding certain unwholesome combinations of food articles. Combining milk with sour and salty thing; with onion, garlic, fish, radish and bananas are few examples. These cause vitiation in *Rakta Dhatu* and may produce skin diseases. In modern time when lots of discussions are there about skin allergies, one shall try to avoid this type of combinations in food.

Together with activities and food, *Acharya* (moral codes of conduct) are also important part of *Dinacharya*. These are based on principles of equality of all creatures and include restraining ourselves from the actions which we do not like for ourselves from others.

Ritucharya:

Ritucharya includes measures (food, activities, routines and livings) according the qualities of the seasons to protect us from their ill effects of seasonal qualities.

Measures to treat a disease:

Ayurvedic way to treat a patient is a complex approach .This includes not only rational treatments but also some unexplainable measures. Ayurveda considers not only the body, not only the mind but also some other subtler aspects. Basically this consists of three types of approaches-

Devavyapashraya Chikitsa - *Man* is a complex organism. He is affected not only by perceptible objects but also by several imperceptible factors. Knowingly or unknowingly he commits something against the laws of natures. As a result of such actions he suffers with diseases those do not respond to a conventional treatment. There *Devavyapashraya* approach is helpful. This includes *Mantras*, prayers and certain rituals to intensify spiritual feelings and thinking. This is hard to explain that how do these procedures help in treatments? But in every human society, similar things are popularly practiced.

Sattvavajaya:

Mind plays important role in causation as well as treatment of diseases. Positive role of mind helps in fast recovery while negativity accelerates the disease process. *Sattvavajaya* is defined as restraining the mind from harmful objects i.e. negative thinking, negative beliefs, negative memories and wrong decisions. This is achieved through meditation, and *Yogic* thinking.

Yuktivyapashraya Chikitsa:

This includes mainly three approaches-

1. ***Nidana Parivarjanam***(Avoidance of the causes): This is important aspect of treating a disease. Several diseases can be treated by avoiding the activities and the food which are in favour of the disease process. A very troublesome disease like migraine can be treated with significant benefit by simply avoiding sour, sharp and hot (in quality) things in the food as these are Pro- Pitta-Vata articles and responsible for this disease. Avoiding otherprovoking mental factors as anger, anxiety grief and alike will add more benefit .Avoidance of pro-*Kapha-Vata* food (all cold things) is certainly helpful to the patient of Asthma which is caused due to vitiation of these *Doshas*. This benefit is observed even in some patients those are taking regularly cortisone and bronchodilators. With this type of measures their requirement for these medicaments has been minimized.
2. ***Samsodhana:***Meaning of this word is to remove some harmful thing from the body. Thus it includes removal of *Doshas* by certain therapeutic techniques and surgical removal of some harmful object from the body. Ayurveda has developed certain techniques to mobilize the *Doshas* and other harmful factors from whole body by *Snehana* (oleation) and *Swedana*(fomentation) to bring them in alimentary canal and then to expel them out through *Vamana* (therapeutic emesis), *Virecana* (purgation), *Niruha* (enema with plants decoctions) and *Anuvasana* (medicated oily enema). To clean cranial structures being most complicated, special measures of *Nasya*(nasal treatments) are suggested. These five cleaning procedures are known as *Panchakarma*. So *Panchakarma* are not just few oil treatments or massage etc. but some very effective measures to eradicate the diseases for ever and to prevent from diseases.

These measures in their simpler form are very effective in some of the challenging diseases of today. For example regular *Nasya* of sesame oil can prevent nearly all upper respiratory problems including common cold, U.R.I., and upto some extend hay fever.

3. ***Samsamana:*** These are palliative therapies applied when the patient is not able to perform *Samsodhanatreatment*. These are also used after *Samsodhana* treatments. This includes *Ahara*

(wholesome food), *Vihara* (wholesome activities) and *Aushadha* (medicaments). In Ayurveda main source of medicaments are plants. Minerals and animal products are also used but they are generally used after being processed with some plants. Anything which cures a disease without producing a new one is medicine in Ayurveda. Thus nothing is non medicinal in the world if one knows how when and where to use that.

In nutshell, Ayurveda is a wisdom that cannot make you immortal but it can bring you closure to an excellent state of well being not only at physical and mental level but also at spiritual level that can led to a feeling of immortality.

If we see the definition of Ayurveda it includes every knowledge related to life. Modern medicine is also not exception for that, provided it does not produce any harm to an individual. Of course if modern medicine is not safe Ayurveda does not recommend it, but when without a modern medical support if there is some danger to life, Ayurveda accepts any minor harm to prevent a bigger harm. Not to use unnecessary harmful medicines is an Ayurvedic principle; similarly to save the life at any cost (including any dogma) is also Ayurvedic principle.

One, more thing we have to remember that Ayurveda is not a panacea. It also describes incurability of the diseases. No one can claim to cure a disease if it is in an incurable state.

“A physician, able to distinguish between curable and incurable diseases, initiates treatment in time applying knowledge, can certainly succeed in curing the disease. On the other hand, a physician who undertakes the treatment of an incurable disease would certainly subject himself to the loss of money, knowledge and fame and will also get bad name and other sanctions from the authorities.” (*ca. su. 10\ 7-8*)

This article is aimed to give a bird-eye-view of Ayurveda to the readers. Hence only some aspects are highlighted. When the readers will develop more and more interest, and will dive more into the depth of this ocean of wisdom, they will enjoy more and more.