**AGING WITH AYURVEDA**

(The VATA Years – The New Social Capital)

*Ayu-Kamayamanena dharmartha-sukha-sadhanam-0ayurvedopadesesu*

*vidheyah paramadarah*

One who desires a long life in order to attain virtue, wealth, and happiness should very respectfully apply oneself to the teachings of Ayurveda (AH Su.1.2)

**INTRODUCTION**

In the last century, we have doubled our life expectancy from 47 to 77 years of age, and this number changes annually. These statistics can be found in multiple places on Google-ji and other research sites. Interestingly, the US average life expectancy dropped in 2020 due to CoVid by one year. However, this ‘new old age’ remains a topic that needs to be addressed from different perspectives.

Let us first look at a definition of aging. ‘Aging has been defined as the sum total of physiological changes that progressively lead to death of the individual. It is also defined as the intrinsic, inevitable, and irreversible age-associated loss of viability that renders us more susceptible to a number of diseases and death or a functional decline of physiological functions and a decrease in fecundity with age.’ Further in the same paper, we are given how Ayurveda defines aging: “*Jara*/aging, according to Ayurveda, is not a disease but a natural phenomenon such as is thirst, hunger, and sleep.” (1)

**ABSTRACT**

In this paper I wish to show why bringing further awareness to the teachings of Ayurveda is so important in today’s world, and how by applying these teachings to our life, a life of longevity is not only possible but can be enjoyed. On a larger scale, Ayurveda not only provides us with the tools to develop an awareness of how to live, essential to a life of longevity, but will also, through this awareness, bring about the building of a world that is as responsive to the very elderly as it is to the young.

**AGING**

Aging throughout human history has always been a topic of great debate. In ancient times we are shown that the ‘old’ were considered a burden; they were ignored or even killed. The category of ‘old’ was not necessarily applied to the age of the person but to the loss of the ability to be productive. It was considered a ‘cruel or weak’ stage of life (2). However, in the East, during Confucianism, we see a more collective approach where more value was given to the family and therefore the elderly. In Mediterranean cultures, it is seen that the elderly were generally revered and often assisted in raising the very young members of the family. As such, the older person remained very integrated well into the later stages of life. (2)

Due to the CoVid pandemic of the past many months, we are seeing here in the US a renewed interest in the family unit - a new (or remembered) understanding of the value of family. We are also witnessing the ‘baby boomers’ reinventing their lives well into their 60’s and 70’, thereby displaying proudly their value in society. As the ‘baby boomers’ continue to speak out, we are seeing a new question emerge; are these years simply tacked on to the end or have we changed the shape and meaning of a lifetime in ways we do not yet fully understand (3). Clearly the more ‘western’ model of the 20th century – to receive the best education, to marry, raise children, work hard, spend endless hours in order to excel in a career and ‘reach the top’ just so one may retire and die (3) is not only no longer valid, but is clearly not working. We have been shown by many of the teachings from the east a very different approach and understanding of life and death – a more ‘circular’ approach that honors the rhythms of Nature.

Ayurveda, as we will see, believes there are 3 stages to life – early, middle, and late. Will this renewed awareness allow us to improve ALL the stages of life so that they become less rushed, less ‘goal oriented’? And, in honoring this way of life, will this allow the individual to not only find their Dharma, but live it? With the possibility of this new paradigm, the need to establish a life of longevity is essential and this process begins in the womb.

This paper is about aging, with a slight emphasis on the later years of life, however, we can see clearly that aging is not just for the elderly. Aging is a process that begins at the moment of conception (some say birth) and continues until death – and who can say for sure whether the consciousness that continues after the physical life has ended does not continue to age in some way. Therefore, lifestyle and dietary choices, what we think, our actions on every level, both internally and externally, must be executed with awareness. How do we gain this awareness? It is my strong belief that Ayurveda provides us with the knowledge we need to accomplish this life of longevity.

So why Ayurveda?  What is it that Ayurveda brings to the discussion on ageing and longevity?  Let’s look at the most basic principles of Ayurveda and, from there, move to the lifestyle and dietary protocols for a healthy and vibrant life.

**AYURVEDA**

In a class discussion with Dr. Robert Svoboda earlier this year, he used two words to describe Ayurveda: *Siddhanta* (theory, conclusion, settled opinion) and *Darshana*, thereby indicating that Ayurveda becomes a way of looking at the world and realizing the truth. The word Ayurveda, when broken down, literally means ‘science of life’ (*Ayur*-science/knowledge and *Veda*-life).

In addition, we see the word’ *Ayu*’ which means lifespan. Dr. Svoboda pointed out that it is this ‘Ayurvedic/Eastern’ awareness to the big picture, to a bigger perspective as to what reality really adds up to that is so beautiful and most definitely what is missing from the modern world. He went on to say that “in truth, there is only ONE perspective; what is appropriate and what is not. We look for what is going to promote and what is going to inhibit; the creation of *sukkah* and the destruction of *dukkha*; happiness/good health/good space vs. misery, dis-ease, difficulty, bad space.” (4)

This science of Ayurveda was given to us 5,000 years ago. One of the beauties of Ayurveda is that at the very beginning there was this great collection of Rishis (sages), physicians, and Acharyas. This allowed for the understanding to be very diverse.  The word *Acharya* is a person who is familiar with *Achar* – which means behavior - what is the right thing to do at the right moment. (4)  We see here a principle called *Svastha Vrita* – the science of ayurvedic prevention – an important aspect of Ayurveda. If we are to “achieve, maintain/ preserve health and prevent disease, we need to pay attention to the three pillars of life which are *Ahara* (diet), *Nidra* (sleep), and *Bramacharya* (celibacy).” (5). Our actions must embrace good behavior. Hence the lifestyle suggestion through *Dinacharya*, daily routine; *Ratricharya*, evening routine; *Ritucharya,* seasonal routines; and *Rtudandhi,* the juncture of the seasons. These different principles/behaviors teach us the best way to act at any given TIME (*Kala*). “On account of the interaction of *Kala* (time), various changes occur in the body during the period of *Ayu* (lifespan); these are natural and cannot be changed.” We see these changes occur consistently, and as mentioned earlier, the lifespan has been divided into three parts, also known as *Vaya: Balavastha* (childhood/early stage) lasts up to about the age of 16; *Madhyavastha* (young/middle stage) lasts from about 16 up to about 60 years; *Vriddhavastha* (old age/late stage) refers to the period after 60 or 70 years of age. The major changes carried out in the body during these stages are growth, achievement and maintenance, and finally, decay. (6)

**THE PANCHAMAHABHUTAS & THE TRI-DOSHIC THEOR**Y

To understand the changes in the body, it is essential to understand the 5 Great Elements,

The *Panchamahabhutas*. However, before we introduce the *Panchamahabhutas*, it is important for me to introduce the concept of *Prakruti* and *Vikruti.* Space does not allow me to go into depth here so allow me to simply say that we are born with a specific constitutional makeup. This is called our *Prakruti –* our “original state”. It is the inherent balance of the three doshas at time of conception (some say birth). This *Prakruit* will not change during one’s lifetime. It becomes, in a sense, the foundation for assessing any imbalances within the body and mind. When we experience any imbalance with any one (or more) of the doshas, it is called *Vikruti,* the present state of the three doshas and how they are expressing themselves in both body and mind.(7) From here, we are able to correct the imbalance, either through our own awareness or through a thorough assessment by a Vaidya (Ayurvedic Doctor or Practitioner).

Returning to the *Panchamahabhutas*, the ancient seers asserted that “only substance or matter can produce an effect. If one can experience something, then this experience occurs because one has come in contact with substance or matter. These seers conceived substance or matter as having five forms”. (*8)* These 5 forms are called the *Panchamahabhutas.* They consist of *Akash* (space), *Vayu* (air), *Tejas* (fire), *Jala* (water) and *Prithvi* (earth). *Akash* is the container of the other 4 elements – without *Akash,* the *Vayu* would not circulate, the *Tejas* would not ignite, the *Jala* would not flow, the *Prithvi* would not be nourished and would eventually decay and destruct.

From these *Panchamahabhuta*s, Ayurveda gives us the *Tri-Doshic* theory. The three *doshas* are *Vata, Pitta, Kapha*. The attributes of these *doshas* are important to make note of.

*Kapha* (earth & water) is dense, cool, moist, heavy, slow, smooth, cloudy; *Pitta* (fire & water) oily, sharp, hot, mobile, sharp (penetrating), liquid; *Vata* (air & ether) dry, light, cold, rough, subtle, mobile, clear. To understand how these elements/doshas interact with each of us,

let us refer to *Ritucharya*, (the seasons) and let us look at winter, the *Kapha* season. *Kapha* will accumulate in winter – the darker, cooler qualities will prevail. The sun is further away, we sleep longer, the days are shorter. In the summer, it is the opposite. The inactive of winter will assist *Kapha* to accumulate and in the spring, this accumulation will create dis-eases if not addressed. This period between winter and spring is the time of *Rtudhandi* – the joint between seasons when a large majority of diseases occur. Joints in Ayurveda are anywhere in the body where one thing becomes something else. Depending on the individual constitution, to transition successfully, one could fast, allowing the ama (toxins) to digest from the tissues and then release from the body; one could consume purifying substances – ginger tea, dandelion greens, bitter/purifying for the liver and kidneys, the chief organs for cleansing toxins out of the body, or one could do a *Panchakarma, the* 5-step detoxification/purifying/rejuvenation therapy. After we purify, we rejuvenate, being sure we spend equal time for on both purification and rejuvenation. (4) This is just an example of how the *panchamahabhutas* assist us in understanding nature and therefore show us what it is we need to do to stay in balance. The same applies to *Dinacharya*, the daily routines. Here we see the times of day according to Ayurveda: The *Kapha* time of day/night is 6 to 10 am and pm; *Pitta* is 10 to 2 am and pm; *Vata* is 2 to 6 am and pm.

Again we notice these joints at pivotal times of the day, We also see them clearly during the 3 stages of life. Looking at the seasons again, in summer we have the manifestation of *Pitta*, so the junction between spring and summer is the time to control *Pitta*. From summer we move into Fall, the junction between summer and fall is the manifestation of *Vata*. Every day, every month, change is happening as the moon changes and the planets move. Once again, health and subsequent longevity depend on our acknowledging the reality of (our) time and how to act/respond accordingly so that we are in rhythm with Nature.

**AYURVEDA NUTRITION AND THE SIX TASTES**

We mentioned earlier about *Ahara* - one of the 3 pillars of human life. *Ahara* literally translates as food/diet. What we do eat and do not eat is essential – it needs to support and provide happiness to the human being. A broader definition of *Ahara*, however, shows us it is anything we take in; it is all that we consume, be it food, water, breath, emotions. Ahara therefore refers to all information that travels through the five sense organs. This understanding and awareness of the qualities of food and actions becomes essential to longevity.

From here, we move to the subject of digestion. After *Aum*, the first word in the Vedas, is *Agni*. *Agni* is the energy of digestion, the transformation, the metabolism, the biological fire. The balance of the doshas is always due to the state of fire in the body. What we can and cannot consume (physically, mentally, emotionally) is essential. A note of clarification here: *Agni* is the fire involved with transformation; *Pitta* (fire and water) is the functional principle of fire and water and is therefore considered moist. Ayurveda teaches us about food through the *Sadrasatmaka Ahara,* the Six Tastes. The six tastes with their elemental compositions are: *Madura,* sweet (earth/water); *Amla,* sour (earth/fire); *Lavana*, salty (water/fire); *Katu,* pungent (fire/air); *Kasaya*, astringent (air/earth); *Tikta*, bitter (air/ether).

In addition, Ayurveda gives us the principle of the *Twenty Tattvas*, the 20 opposites. It is from this understanding of the tattvas that we receive the #1 rule in Ayurveda: ‘like increases like’ and ‘opposites balance’. From this golden rule, we are able to correct imbalances easily when they first appear. For example, if our constitution is overheating, it would indicate that an abundance of the fire element is present so we would apply cooling foods, herbs, therapies, and engage in cooling lifestyle activities. As we can see, we apply these principles to all of lifestyle and nutrition.

**ABHYANGA**

*Abhyanga* is the practice of self-massage with warm oils that have been infused with a combination of herbs to suit the person’s constitution and what s/he may be experiencing in life. I believe this practice to be most profound. Much research has been done on this practice and I could spend the next 10 pages quoting it all – so allow me to simply say that the impact of self-oil massage has been proven to delay the aging process and reverse age-associated pathological changes.

**CONCLUSION**

Aging can and should be a glorious adventure. Joan Chittister in her book “The Gift of Years” writes: “There are two approaches to aging – passive and active. Passive aging gives way to the creeping paralysis of the soul that goes with the natural changes of the body………Active aging cooperates with the physical effects of age by adjusting to a change of pace.” (9) Aging is a given; but how we age is not. Ayurveda provides us with the perfect GPS for aging. As each person begins to embrace these principles of Ayurveda, society has the potential to change from one that is stressed out and unhealthy in every sense of the word, to one that is vibrant, healthy, happy and living their full and natural lifespan in rhythm with Nature.

I share with you with a little gem from a charming book entitled “The Little Paris Bookshop”. We enter in during a discussion regarding ‘old classic’ books. Monsieur Perdue says, in part “………..books aren’t eggs, you know. Simply because a book has aged a bit doesn’t mean it’s gone bad. What is wrong with old? Age isn’t a disease. We all grow old, even books. But are you, is anyone, worth *less*, or *less* important, because they’ve been around for longer?” (10)

As a society with the potential to live well into our 90’s, it is time for us to not only understand but to embrace whole heartedly this ‘new old age’ - these newly acquired 20 or 30 years that are now ours to enjoy and share with the world. By doing so, as mentioned earlier, we can bring about the building of a world that is as responsive to the very elderly as it is to the young. In order to do this, it is my firm belief that it is the teachings and principles of Ayurveda that will assist all of us in finding the life of health, happiness and longevity that is our right from birth.

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Note: I have attended countless workshops, seminars, speeches, and classes in Ayurveda over the past 20+ years. There will naturally be some references from class notes, the source of which is unknown. To anyone who may recognize ‘their words’ I apologize for not issuing credit.