

AYURVEDA

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Traditionally in India, the training and teaching of Ayurveda took place in forest schools where students will spend a number of years learning the art of living and healing and exploring the secrets of nature.

At the end of their training period the students will be asked to pack a picnic lunch and to go out into the forest to spend the day looking for plants which have no nutritional or medicinal value.

If by the evening, a student returns having failed to find such a plant then the teachers will give their blessings, “now you are ready to practice, go and serve your community”. If a student returns with a plant or two not knowing what their healing properties are then the teachers will say, “stay a bit longer and learn more!” The implication is loud and clear; every plant, tree, shrub or herb is endowed with nourishing and curing qualities. The challenge for teachers and students is to discover those qualities through trial and error and through experiment and experience over a period of time.

In Ayurveda there is no distinction between food and medicine. Cumin and coriander, basil and bay leaf, ginger and turmeric, pepper and cinnamon are all food as well as medicine.

The word ‘Ayurveda’ means ‘knowledge of living a healthy life’. Thus, Ayurveda is more than a collection of herbal remedies it is the science of life.

Ayurveda is based on three physical and three metaphysical principles, these are: vata (air), pitta (fire), kapha (water). Our physique is made of the earth element and its health is maintained by the equilibrium, balance and harmony of air, fire and water. These three elements are within our bodies and our bodies are within them. The outer landscape and the inner landscape are indistinguishable for total wellbeing. If air is polluted then our breathing will suffer. If the temperature in the atmosphere rises then fire energy in our bodies will also be out of balance, and if water is contaminated then we will lose our health as the health of natural environment is a prerequisite for personal health.

The symptoms of a disease are simply a signpost. The most important practice in Ayurveda is to understand the causes of ill health and work to remove them. This practice helps to build defences as preventative measures. ‘As farmers construct dams to prevent their fields being flooded, likewise human beings take conscious precautions to stem the forces of disequilibrium and thus preserve the health of mind, body and spirit of the individuals, their human community and the planet earth at large.

The three metaphysical principles are sattvic, rajasic, tamasic.

Sattvic means simple, natural, true and elegant. **Rajasic** means glamorous, greedy and excessive.

Tamasic means heavy, depressing and destructive. These three qualities of life are as much external attributes as they are an internal state of being and therefore they are the touchstone of healthy living.

In everything – thinking, speaking, eating, etc one of the three qualities is predominant. For instance, foods that promote vitality and easy to digest are sattvic. Glamorous and wasteful foods are rajasic, intoxicating and heavy foods are tamasic. Similarly the clothes we wear, the houses we inhabit, the language we speak and the relationships we develop are all built on these qualities. A healthy life is achieved when the sattvic quality is prominent. To be sattvic means to be gentle, kind and truthful. These soul qualities are health imperative in Ayurvedic way of life. Physical health, emotional health and spiritual health are indivisible.

In Sanskrit a healthy person is called ‘svastha’ which means established in the self; being rooted, grounded and based within oneself. When earth, air, fire and water within our body and within our planet earth are in a condition of equilibrium and when we are in tune with our true self we are in the state of health.

Satish Kumar was only nine years old when he renounced the world and joined the wandering brotherhood of Jain monks. At the age of eighteen, he left the monastic order and became a campaigner, working to turn Gandhi’s vision of renewed India and a peaceful world into reality. Fired by the example of Bertrand Russell, he undertook an 8,000 mile peace pilgrimage, walking from India to America without any money delivering packets of ‘peace tea’ to the leaders of the four nuclear powers. Since 1973, he has been the Editor of Resurgence magazine. www.resurgence.org