

According to Ayurvedacures.com, the sole purpose of the practice of Ayurveda is to “maintain the health of healthy people” and “cure the diseases of sick people”. While this may be true, it is only a one-dimensional view of the true purposes of Ayurveda. Western society has utilized the system of Ayurveda without integrating the original intention of the practice. According to Doctor Marc Halpern DC CKS PKS, founder of the National Ayurvedic Medical Association and California College of Ayurveda, “The highest goal of Ayurveda has never been immortality in the physical sense, but spiritual immortality in the form of enlightenment, hence the goal of Ayurveda has always been to keep people healthy while they pursue their more important spiritual goals.” In this way, the true purpose of Ayurveda is congruent with the Vedic tradition: “Finding the powers of nature only an expression of the more awe-inspiring powers of the human consciousness” (Upanishads, 21).

The phrase, “Vedic religion” refers to a complicated yet systematic set of religious values, ideas and practices from ancient India, most of which make up the foundation of modern Hinduism. In general, the ideas of the Vedic tradition revolve around the powers of nature, the diverse personalities and behaviors of the gods and goddesses that formed the world, the composition and dynamics of the human community and the structure and destiny of a transcendent universal order and harmony of being (Mahony, 1). The Ayurvedic tradition, created slightly later than the original Vedic texts, draws on these ideas to form its practice. The Sanskrit word *veda*, though it literally means knowledge, does not refer solely to a person’s ability to know things. According to the Upanishads, “The student

to whom they were taught was expected not only to listen to the words, but to *realize* them: that is, to make their truths an integral part of character, conduct, and consciousness” (Upanishads, 23). This was done mainly through the practices of ritual and meditation. The cosmos according to the Vedas can be described as a “harmonious whole, an artful universe, teeming with life” and not simply an accumulation of objects. All components of the cosmos are interconnected and sacred. Therefore, disruption of order in one part leads to the breaking up of the entire order. Each component has its own responsibility. Humans contribute to the harmony of the universe through righteous action and rituals as partners to the celestial beings.

As Vedic ritual is performed to keep the worlds external elements in balance, Ayurveda is practiced to maintain the balance of the natural elements within the body. Like the earth, the body is composed of five key elements: ether (space), air, fire, water and earth. While we exist as the composite of these five elements, certain elements are seen to have the ability to combine to create various physiological functions. This composition is known as a person’s *doshas*. Unlike the five elements, the three *doshas* are very real albeit subtle forces that exist within the body. They cannot be measured in any real sense, but they can be observed and monitored. In the physical body, the three *doshas*-- *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*-- mirror the three basic functions of all existence: all of existence must first come into creation (*kapha*), once created, all of existence struggles for survival (*pitta*), eventually, all of creation returns to dust for recycling (*vata*). These three concepts have equivalent meanings in Hindu mythology: Brahma as the creator, Vishnu as the preserver, and Shiva as the destroyer.

The Vedas developed the worship of the fire god, Agni, to an extraordinary degree. Agni is the personification of sacrificial fire. He acts as a liaison between man and the heavenly gods, as a priest among gods. In Vedic art, Agni is often represented as a cow or bull and is interpreted to symbolize the “cooking of the world,” emphasizing the creative role that sacrifice had in shaping and maintaining the world and its processes (Engler, 432). Ayurveda elaborates on this “cosmic cooking” as a way to characterize individuals and their relationship to their physical environment. Several themes important to both Vedic and Ayurvedic texts converge in the relation between the cow and its milk. According to the *Rig Veda*, “the cow manifests a fundamental ambiguity because it is raw (needing further preparation to be converted into food) yet it produces a cooked food, milk, which is ready to consume” (Engler, 432). In Ayurveda, cow’s milk is thought of as whole food: possessing all of the qualities of the vital fluid, *ojas*, the necessary essence of all bodily constituents. *Agni* can also be found in the *Atharva Veda* where the term is used to describe the “cosmic cooking” processes of the body, illustrating the enzymes responsible for digestion and transforming one material to another.

The Vedic concepts of *karma* and *moksha* are also central to Ayurvedic practice. *Karma*, literally “action,” is understood as the law of cause and effect, action and reaction that governs all life and binds the Self (*atman*) to the wheel of *samsara* (the cycle of birth and death). *Karma* resides not just in the physical, but also at the mental and spiritual levels. According to the Vedas, *karma* is not fate, but rather a direct result of man’s actions towards the cosmic universe. *Moksha* refers to the release from the cycle of *karma*, life and death. Engler, in his article *Science vs. Religion*, discusses the purposes of *karma* in the Ayurvedic tradition. He explains how the concept of *karma* is not separate from the causes

of disease, but rather one factor among several. In addition, medicinal therapies and physical circumstances can override karmic influences, meaning that the physical and mental constitution of an individual is not solely a result of karma. As a result, Ayurveda's view of karma makes room for the idea that diet, medication and the proper use of the mind and senses in this life can have an effect on health and disease (Engler, 434).

The Vedic concepts of Self are also present in the Ayurvedic tradition. Meditation is used as a method for one to get more in touch with one's Self and ponder the questions of life. It is described in the Upanishads as "when concentration is profound, there are moments when you forget the body entirely...this experience quietly dissolves physical identification...the body becomes like a jacket: you wear it easily, and in meditation you can unbutton and loosen it until it scarcely weighs on you at all" (Upanishads, 36).

Ayurveda includes meditation in its list of practices as a way to further the mind/body connection with the absolute self. Shirodhara, a treatment in which a stream of warm, medicated oil is poured onto the forehead in order to open up the sixth chakra, is meant to promote a meditative state. In my understanding, the ultimate goal of Ayurveda is to provide the Self with a healthy vessel through which it can be explored.

With this in mind, how can the eastern world condone what is happening to Ayurveda in the west? While researching this topic, I kept experiencing the same phenomenon: websites that dumbed-down the goals of Ayurveda to fit a western market dominated by the latest "health-crazes" and cleanses. For example, Deepak Chopra, a well-known medical doctor and spiritual guru, offers Ayurvedic services at his Chopra center with the intention to provide "guests [with] timeless tools and healing principles that they can use to nurture their own health, restore balance, and create greater joy and fulfillment

in their lives” (Chopra, About Us). While the center does offer the traditional Ayurvedic treatments such as Shirodhara and the Panchakarma cleanse (a total cleansing of the body and mind) and even offers decent explanations of the treatments, the spa setting, along with the pricing, does not allow clients to get a true Ayurvedic experience and jumpstart their path to health.

While at Chamundi Hill Palace in Kerala over winter break, I lived Ayurveda for eighteen days. Based on my health issues and constitution, I was prescribed a treatment program meant to set me back on the path to health. Even though my program was unique to my constitution, the center charged a daily blanket price to all guests. The program consisted of a strict vegan diet, yoga twice a day, and two treatments a day along with other medications prescribed by the doctor. The Westerner in me expected to start feeling good and healthy the first day I was there, that proximity to health would make me healthy. Unfortunately this was not the case, and I felt awful until halfway through my second week (at which point I had lost all appetite for the vegan diet, but that’s another story). This is something that would never work in the western world. In the west, we expect to take a pill and be healthy, lose weight, or be happy. Any schedule disrupting program that lasts longer than five days is unrealistic for the average westerner, hence why the Chopra center only offers a five-day Panchakarma program. While the cleanse itself can realistically take place in that timeframe, the center leaves the most important aspects of the cleanse, the preparation and follow-up, in the hands of the client.

“Western medicine and thinking tend to generalize and categorize individuality. For instance, according to the western concept of normality, what is common in a majority of people constitutes the norm. Ayurveda holds that normality must be evaluated individually because every human constitution manifests its own particular and spontaneous temperament and functioning. In the east, the key to

understanding is acceptance, observation, and experience. In the west, it is questioning, analysis, and logical deduction. The western mind generally trusts objectivity while the eastern gives more emphasis to subjectivity. Eastern science teaches one to go beyond the division between subjectivity and objectivity. This difference in approach may explain why some westerners experience difficulty in comprehending the methodology of Ayurveda.” – (Lad, 19).

What I ultimately experienced was a brief observation of my physical body that resulted in my own acknowledgment of my higher Self, however fleeting.

Though it can be argued that Ayurveda has radically transformed the original Vedic ideas to shape its practice, there is no doubt that without the religious foundation, the tradition would be just another passing health craze. Marc Halpern said it best: “to separate Ayurveda from spirituality would be to practice it in a manner akin to allopathy, then it would no longer be Ayurveda.” As an inclusive practice, absorbing elements of Islamic and western medicine, Ayurveda remains tolerant of all paths to the Self much like the Vedic tradition. In order for Ayurveda to successfully integrate into western culture, there must be an opening of the western mind, bridging the gap between subjectivity and objectivity.

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