

THE HISTORY OF AYURVEDA

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The history of Ayurveda is shrouded in the mists of time. No one really knows for sure how it began. It is timeless like the Universe itself. Hindus believe that Bramhadev, the Great God of Creation himself passed on his knowledge to mankind. We do know however that this ancient wisdom originated in India and is over five thousand years old. It has survived despite countless invasions and very little being written down because for generations it has been passed on by word of mouth from guru to disciple in the divine language that is Sanskrit. Like a sheet of music becomes alive when it is played by musicians, so it is believed that the Sanskrit words are energised when they are spoken. When I hear the sounds they release their vibrational energy which transcends into my heart and soul like a symphony of love, joy and healing. It is a poetic language, where vast volumes of work are contained in simple short verses or slokas. In these poetic extracts, enshrined in the religious rituals, are the pearls of wisdom on which Ayurveda, as it is practised today is based.

Legend has it that many thousands of years ago long before the Vedas (the ancient Hindu scriptures) were written, the people who lived near the Ganges and Sindha rivers suffered from diseases of the body and the mind. There was no release. Disease and unrest was increasing. The people approached the great God Brahmadev and told him how his people were suffering from chronic disease for which they had no remedy. They asked the Great God, "Please help us to cure disease" they said, "help to make us healthy for a long time." Brahmadev heard what the people were saying and closed his eyes for a moment, and remembered. He knew this knowledge by heart, it was etched in his soul. He passed down this knowledge to the Ashwin twins who were the celestial doctors of the Gods and they passed it on to their students who included Indra and Daksha prajajapati.

Indra in turn passed this ancient wisdom to his disciples, one of whom was Divodas Dhanvantari (Not to be confused with Dhanwantari the Healing God of Ayurveda). Divodas was the King of Varanassi and also a talented surgeon. He developed a school for surgery in about the 9th to the 6th century BC. He spread his knowledge to others including Sushrut who wrote the Shushrut Samhita in the 4th to the 5th century.

Another of Indra's students was Bharadwaj. In about the 8th to 6th century he developed a school for physicians. He taught Aatreya who was a gifted and great teacher who inspired many students. One day Aatreya asked 8 of his most brilliant students including Charaka, Harita and Bheda to write down what they have studied and learned from his teachings over the past years. Only Charakas manuscript written about the 1st century AD survived the ravages of time but some pages were lost. The rest of the students work was largely lost – only a few scattered pages have been found.

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Charaka Samhita was re-written by Chakra Pani Datta in the 2nd or 3rd century AD. He filled in the missing pieces of the Charaka's manuscript with whatever he understood. This Charaka Samhita is the first treatise of Ayurveda.

About the same time Sushruta, an eminent surgeon also wrote notes with more emphasis on surgery.

As centuries passed by there were some additions and commentaries by other scholars written in the Sanskrit language – some in prose, some in poems. These 8 sections known as Astanga hridayam contributed to 8 branches of Ayurveda including philosophy, information about plants, diagnosis, treatment, some mention of toxicology, panchakarma (detoxification) and Ayurvedic pharmacy. More on this in a moment.

Ayurveda, as I said at the outset, mainly comes from an ancient oral tradition (Arthava Veda). On the banks of the Ganges the wise men looked at nature, the sky, the space, the oceans, the water, the morning air, the earth. They noticed these elements were needed and normal for maintaining life on earth. They also saw if there was excess such as heavy rains, this affected the movements of the ocean and they noticed how these changes affected living things in both the animal and plant kingdoms. They realised these forces were important and they should praise them and ask them to be normal forever. They started to chant mantras to these elements such as the Sun God, Fire God. They started performing traditions and rituals to the Gods asking them to give them rice, wheat and ghee (clarified butter). They knew the names of the plants. They also used to sacrifice animals and would regularly dissect them and open up the abdomen and take a fatty lining (omentum) to the Gods to satisfy them – they felt as if the Gods were eating the foods and enjoying their offering. The mantras were chanted and the offerings were done in many places along the banks of the River Ganges.

There are four Vedas or ancient texts written about 5 thousand years ago. The Rig Veda was the first. Here the wise men laid down the rituals of paying homage to the five great elements because these were the Gods that should take care of the universe.

Second came the Yajur Ved. Here procedures were outlined, for example, if there was change in the five great elements such as drought; how to activate change by praying to the Rain God, the Fire God. They understood and paid homage to the importance of Fire.

Third came the Sama Ved. Here all the stanzas and slokas were written down – these were the prayers they used to chant. All Indian classical music comes from this Veda. They noticed the singing had an effect on wellbeing and it is what we understand today as vibrational medicine.

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The last Veda is the Atharva Ved. Here there is more mention of the medical uses of the plants. Many of these plants were offered to the Gods such as Brahmi which is good for the mind. They were using these plants and knew what each plant was good for. They understood the disease process. They also knew internal anatomy of the animal kingdom. From all this information they understood how physiology is related to our anatomy. They linked external factors to the internal body. They tried to explain the physiology of the body.

Artharva Ved was the last of the Vedas and it was from this that Ayurveda evolved about 2 and a half thousand years ago.

Much of the information and manuscripts were destroyed as invaders plundered India and destroyed them. Only a few left. Documentation in India is negligible however we can piece together some of the chronology from the artefacts found outside India. Traders and scholars would come to India – from the Middle East, China and Greece. They wrote information on what they had seen and how the treatments and surgery were carried out. One of the observers was a Chinese trader called Hue Yen Tsang in the beginning of the 2nd to 3rd century. He wrote about what he observed in India at that time including politics and Ayurvedic medicine. Another manuscript by Bowers in the Middle East was discovered in the 18th century dating back to about the 7th or 8th Century.

Asthang Hridayam written in about the 8th century is the essence of Ayurveda contains information on the 8 branches.

Vag Bhat compiled all the information known as the 3 great Compendia on Ayurveda.

Kashyap Samhita was written about the 5th century about paediatrics, obstetrics and gynaecology.

In 1400 Dr Harvey demonstrated how blood was circulated from the heart to the body and came back. He showed this in detail and dissected all of the body.

However 2000 years before him the concept was described in the Charaka Samhita – where the location of the heart is described, the shape is said to be like a closed lotus having 10 branches. It gives blood all over the body Rasa/Rakta dhatu (blood and lymph). They also described how they were performing plastic surgery long before the birth of Christ. There were sharp instruments used in battles and organs, limbs were cut. They used organs and limbs from other humans or animals – this was written about in the 3rd or 4th century. Plastic surgery is also mentioned. Eye surgery was mentioned in detail by Shustruta Samhita in the 3rd century AD. Modern surgery books describe Sushruta as the father of modern plastic surgery. Today new instruments have arrived but the procedure for treating cataracts remains the same.

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It was because of Buddha in the 7th to 9th century AD and under his follower Emperor Ashoka all major surgical procedures were stopped – only minor surgery was allowed. It was no longer thought to be right to dissect or kill an animal or human. This meant that surgeons lost the art of how to operate and the tradition was lost. Also during the time of Buddha the knowledge of Ayurveda spread through Tibet, China, Japan and the Far East. It arguably became the inspiration and foundation for Traditional Chinese Medicine.

In the 11th century the people were trying to make Gold from mercury. There were many Alchemists who tried and tried. They did not make gold but they did learn to find a natural way of purifying mercury and how it could be used to cure disease. This is the beginning of Rasa Shastra – the science of mercury and other metals. The pioneer was Nag Arjuna.

There were 3 books written in the 14th century.

1. Madhavar Nidan – which detailed diagnosis and gave more precise information on this skill.
2. Bharva prakash written by Bhavar Mishra – where more emphasis was placed on food articles. The good and bad qualities. What is useful to eat and what is not.
3. Sharanga Dhar Samhita wrote about how to prepare medicines or Ayurvedic pharmacy.

These 3 books are known as the lesser compendium Lagu tra-ee.

After 15th/16th century many scholars gave their commentaries on the ancient text. These texts were in poem form and sometimes a word had 2 or 3 meanings. These scholars unravelled the information and new reference manuals were slowly compiled. In the 20th century all the Samhitas were translated into the regional languages of India. Vidiotrir explained it further in Hindi. 1906 Pade Shastri explained it in the Maharastrian language. 1920-1924 Dr Gerde wrote about modern medical procedures and a bit later in 1930 Vaidya Borkar wrote his interpretation on the Sushruta Samhita.

The British were the most recent invaders to conquer India and during their rule they dismissed the Ayurvedic doctors and healers. They bought their own system of medicine which came from the Greek and Roman Empires. They were not aware that the very foundation of their so-called modern medicine actually came from Ayurveda and probably from the universities and centres of learning that existed in India long before the birth of Christ. During the British rule Ayurveda's popularity waned as the people of India also rejected the ancient ways in favour of the more fashionable colonial medicine. Ayurveda was no longer taught in universities.

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I perhaps should also mention at this point that the women of India have also played a huge part in helping to keep many of the Ayurvedic principles alive for thousands of years. Many of the religious rituals and ceremonies actually contain Ayurvedic lifestyle and health advice such as what to eat in which season; what herbs and plants to offer the different Gods and deities at different times of the year and how praying and meditation can calm the mind. The mothers have passed on to their daughters what spices to use in cooking, what spices and herbs are good for treating minor illnesses and the importance of giving daily massage to their babies and children. These traditions and ceremonies were designed by the wise men many centuries ago as a way of conveying and instilling Ayurvedic lifestyle advice to the population as a whole, it became an integral part of the way of life.

After India gained Independence from British rule, a university was formed in my home town of Pune near Mumbai. It was named after the region's great political leader and freedom fighter Tilak. Here Ayurveda once again was on the curriculum in India and was part of the faculty of medical sciences. The department was later separated and affiliated with Pune University where In 1955 Ayurveda was taught to degree level (Bachelor of Ayurvedic Medicine - BAMS) for the first time in India. Soon other universities in India followed suit.

As the numbers of scholars continues to grow throughout India and across the globe the popularity of Ayurveda and respect for this ancient healing system once again shines like a beacon for the benefit of generations to come.

I am so honoured to be taught Ayurveda by Professor Dr. P.H Kulkarni. He was in the first batch to graduate from the school of 1955. He compiled a commentary on the Charaka Samhita in 1983 and in 1986 on the Sushutra Samhita. He has taught 33 Ayurvedic PhD students (the highest number for any academic in India) including the renowned Dr Vasant Lad. He has also taught and inspired 16 Master of Ayurveda students as well as 100 post graduate research fellows across the world.

I am a lucky person indeed because my guru Professor Kulkarni has given me a priceless, timeless gift; the passing of ancient Ayurvedic knowledge by word of mouth from teacher to student. I have been taught the same way my forefathers were taught. This knowledge comes to me and so I share this love and wisdom with you.