

*Media Report***Ayurveda: The Art of Healing and Being in an Ancient Indian Tradition**

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Ayurveda, a 2001 documentary film by Pan Nalin, opens with an elder collecting and washing plants by a riverside, begging pardon from the Lord for uprooting them, saying that they are necessary for medicine. That single scene encapsulates the main message of this film, echoing Hindu cosmology, that for Ayurveda "everything in and around us are one and single existence."

Dr G. Gangadharan of the Medicinal Plant Conservation Centre in Kerala, India, elaborates on this principle: "The microcosm, the body in which we are living, or that of all the living beings, and the macrocosm around us, are all part of one unit. And the role of the physician is merely the role of a conveyor belt between these two, where he may be processing something so that the body can easily assimilate it. Other than that, there is nothing. He is doing nothing other than substituting things which are lacking in the system by things which are available externally."

The term Ayurveda broadly refers to the ancient Hindu medical system, recorded in texts dating back three thousand years and divided into eight branches that correspond roughly to internal or general medicine, pediatrics, psychiatry, ear, nose and throat, surgery, toxicology, geriatrics and rejuvenation. The earliest texts refer to what would be recognized today as brain research, noting the neurological qualities of health and disease. The ancient corpus was redacted by Charaka in around 300BCE, which provides a codified basis for the continuity of the tradition to the present.

Ayurvedic medicine proceeds from five bodily elements arranged according to three energies: 1) space and air, with the basic quality of movement, 2) fire, with the basic quality of heat, and 3) water and earth, with the basic quality of fluidity. In diagnosing a patient, the physician will take pulses for these three energies on the nerves of the thumb, index and middle fingers, and supplement this with careful examination of the fingernails, which indicate blood flow, and the eyes, which reflect disease and constitution. In addition to demonstrating diagnosis, the film features treatment sessions in which therapies ranging from massage to purging are utilized.

The intimate contact with each patient, from diagnosis through treatment, is underlined by a basic principle, as stated by Ayurvedic physician Brahmanand Swamigal, who insists that, "I do not treat diseases, I treat people." The film profiles Swamigal, observing his practice and learning something of his training. From a long lineage of fourteen generations of Ayurvedic physicians, he began studying with his father at age thirteen and continued to study throughout his 55 year career, having learned specializations from 20 gurus, or masters, who used poetry as a way to aid in learning the medical principles and formulas. Many of these gurus are now deceased, perhaps pointing to the fragility of a trans-generational master-student tradition, but which is nevertheless necessary to interpret and pass on the interwoven ancient wisdoms to the younger generations.

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The moral implications of the Ayurvedic tradition are explored by Brahmanand Swamigal, who suggests that "if science is only followed for money, it is wasted" and that "wealth earned from medical sciences is always contaminated as it comes from the suffering of others, thus it must be practiced with compassion and humility, and without greed or ego." To demonstrate this, the film takes viewers into a free clinic in rural India, and in a section discussing training of practitioners, it is suggested that before entering into a course of medical study or apprenticeship in Ayurvedic traditions, students are screened to be certain they can conform to these basic moral principles.

Throughout the film, several cases are presented in which Ayurvedic and Western traditions are compared. In a demonstration of treatment for diabetic retinitis, for example, Dr B.G. Gokulan, a practitioner of Ayurvedic ophthalmology, notes that the Ayurvedic tradition is more concerned with treating the cause of disease, not just the symptoms. For treating schizophrenia and other mental illnesses, Ayurvedic approaches work to awaken the mind by removing toxins from the body, while the main approach in Western medicine aims to quiet the mind by prescribing sedatives.

Practitioners of Ayurvedic medicine outside India are profiled in several case studies, such as at the Holistic Health Centre in Athens,

Greece, where Dr Nicolos Kostopoulos applies Ayurvedic principles and methods, including yoga and herbal treatments, to help provide relief for his patients from the stresses of the modern lifestyle. Dr Scott Gerson, a physician at the National Institute of Ayurvedic Medicine New York, discusses questions about adapting the ancient Ayurvedic traditions to modern society, where people are more interested in instant results and shortcuts. Over the twenty years of his practice, he has come to the conclusion that, "what we are missing in modern society is being in harmony with the rhythms of nature" and that many of the diseases of modern society are those of overconsumption, which needs a lifestyle change.

Several segments of the film demonstrate the laborious procedures for collecting and preparing the natural ingredients, from minerals and plants, into various Ayurvedic compounds, some of which involve the use of gems and other precious stones integrated with astronomical data. In the end, however, Ayurveda is not merely a system of medicines and treatments. Rather, as Dr Ashwin Barot says, "Ayurveda is the art of living, how to live, and Ayurveda is the art of being."

"Ayurveda: Art of Being" was produced by Pandora Films in association with Monsoon Films. Further information is available at www.ayurvedafilm.com and an excerpt is at www.linktv.org.