

History of Ayurveda

Since at least 3000 BC, knowledge has been collected and systematized for the purpose of preventing and healing illness and disease. Doctors in ancient times were paid to maintain the health of all of the members of the family that hired them; they were paid to *prevent* illness. If someone got sick, the Ayurvedic Doctor's income was reduced because they were not doing their job.

As in all ancient civilizations, there was no separation between science, philosophy and religion. Therefore, Ayurveda incorporates beliefs and philosophies about the universe, human existence and our purpose in life. While it's beyond the scope of this introduction to look at these philosophies in depth, suffice it to say that Ayurveda is very unique in that it presents no fewer than six philosophies about the creation of the universe and the nature of existence and consciousness. In this way, Ayurveda is both exceptionally inclusive in its perspective and highly varied and flexible in its ideologies and methods. The result is a system of medicine that works with each individual in a unique way, based on the individual's unique characteristics and perspectives.



Ayurveda posits that we are all made up of the same elements, in varying amounts from person-to-person. When these elements combine and express themselves in characteristic ways, they are called Doshas. **The 3 Doshas are: Vata (Space & Air), Pitta (Fire & Water) and Kapha (Water & Earth).**

According to Ayurveda, we are born with a particular ratio of these elements (or Doshas); we can refer to this as our Ayurvedic Constitution. To enjoy good health, we must maintain this ratio. For example, if one is born with a ratio of Vata 2: Pitta 3: Kapha 1, that is the ratio of the elements/Doshas that this individual needs to maintain through appropriate diet, daily routine and lifestyle practices, in order to feel well and healthy. It is helpful to note that this ratio is also sometimes called, simply, one's Dosha. Alternatively, it is referred to as one's Constitution or Prakruti/Prakriti.

The challenge in maintaining our Dosha is this: we are constantly affected by the world around us and that means that we accumulate more of certain elements/Doshas due to our diet, physical activities and relationships as well as the seasons and the climate we live in.

An individual whose ratio of the Doshas is the same as in the example above is someone we would call Pitta Predominant because they have more Pitta (Fire & Water) in their ratio. A person with such a constitution will be most challenged to maintain health when their diet, lifestyle, the season or climate has more of the Fire and Water elements. Too much spicy, salty, sour (fire element) or oily (water element) food can easily tip the scales and cause Pitta to become *aggravated*. Exposure to sun and heat in summer, intense physical or mental activity/human interaction can also cause an imbalance in mind-body health, as these are also expressions of the Fire element. When we accumulate more of the elements that make up our predominant Dosha, we say that the Dosha becomes *aggravated*. For convenience, we refer to this state as an *imbalance*. Using our example, if Pitta is aggravated, this imbalance (traditionally called the *Vikruti* or Present State), can be expressed as a ratio as well (example: Vata 2: Pitta 3.5: Kapha 1).

Thus, it is the work of the Ayurvedic practitioner to correctly assess the Dosha/Prakruti/Constitution of the individual, as well as their Vikruti/Present State. Then the practitioner advises the individual

regarding diet (can include herbs, supplements) and daily routine (including exercise, stress management techniques etc.), in order to reestablish the original ratio of the elements. Again, the individual's unique ratio, or Dosha/Prakruti, is always what we're aiming to reestablish and maintain.

Although each individual is different and serious health conditions are more complex, in general there are 2 main routes back to health when accumulation of elements has led to aggravation/imbalance:

1. Reduce the aggravating factors (example: a salty diet has resulted in *aggravated Pitta* in our example, so we reduce salt intake); this principle is expressed as *Like Increases Like*
2. Introduce an element that has qualities that are the opposite of the aggravating factor to *pacify* the aggravated Dosha (example: in summer, we swim in, and drink, cool water and eat raw and cold foods, all of which are cooling and therefore pacify Pitta Dosha); this principle is expressed as *Opposites Decrease Each Other*

Further examples of applying these principles:

Someone who is *Vata Predominant* (primarily Space & Air) would eat more warm, moist foods and practice yoga in a slow and grounding way in order to avoid aggravation of Vata which is, by nature, cold, dry, mobile and light. One who is *Kapha Predominant* would consume only lightly cooked, less oily foods and incorporate a more dynamic, intense and heat-generating Yoga practice to avoid aggravation of Kapha which is cool, oily, heavy and slow.

The above suggestions are generalizations. It should be noted that, in order to safely and effectively use Ayurvedic principles to reestablish and maintain health we must understand the subtlety and complexity of an individual's Prakruti (Dosha) and Vikruti (Present State). This takes years of study and while we can most certainly introduce basic Ayurvedic practices into our daily life, in order to reap the full benefit of Ayurvedic knowledge we would be best to consult with a qualified Ayurvedic Practitioner or Doctor (Vaidya).

When long-standing and/or serious health matters are present, *Panchakarma* may be necessary in order to reestablish health. Panchakarma – which translates, literally, as *Five Actions* – is an individualized program of cleansing and nourishment that is designed by an Ayurvedic Practitioner, in order to restore the correct balance of the Doshas for that particular individual.

While the individual may do some of these practices on their own, they should be supervised by a practitioner who has specific and in-depth knowledge about the individual's Prakruti and Vikruti.

