

Chapter 1

Introducing Ayurveda: The Science of Life

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering the history of the Vedas
 - ▶ Accessing the aims of Ayurveda
 - ▶ Learning about the Sanskrit language
 - ▶ Surveying the scope of Ayurveda
 - ▶ Mentioning the main texts and where to find the evidence
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Welcome to the world of Ayurveda – a vast treasure house of knowledge of natural healthcare given to us by holy men called *rishis*. Literally meaning ‘science of life’, Ayurveda encompasses all aspects of your well-being, from breathing to digestion.

In this chapter, I introduce you to the ancient art of Ayurveda.

Living Well and Maintaining Health

Ayurveda is a truly holistic health system which supports you from the cradle to the end of your life. The Ayurvedic mode of living aims to maximise your lifespan by optimising your health through interventions that care for your body, mind, spirit and environment. Ayurveda places a great emphasis on the prevention of disease and on health promotion, as well as on a comprehensive approach to treatment.



Looking into Ayurveda's origins

The genealogy of Ayurveda traces back to about 5,000 years ago in the Indus valley, where the *Vedas*, or oldest Ayurvedic scriptures, originated. Legend has it that the knowledge within the Vedas was downloaded, so to speak, to a number of sages in deep meditation. This was experienced as an act of divine love to help us manage and maximise our lives on earth. For centuries, this knowledge was passed down from one generation to the next in the form of memorised chants known as *sutras*.

There are four Vedas, the oldest of which is the Rig Veda, which refers to three great beings governing the universe, in the form of Agni, Soma and Indra, which are personifications of the sun, moon and wind. These in turn become what are known as the *doshas*, which govern all activities in your body and are called *pitta*, *kapha* and *vata* respectively. (You can become acquainted with your own unique balance of these forces by referring to Chapter 4.)

Known as the fourth veda, the Atharvaveda (meaning 'no vibration', or how to make

the mind stable), contains the knowledge of Ayurveda. Two systems of medicine are described. The first is a compilation of drugs used on an empirical, rational basis, while the other describes a type of magical spiritual medicine.

Yet another version of the origins of Ayurveda is given by Sushruta, considered the founder of surgical medicine. Sushruta and other sages approached Dhanvantari, the god of Ayurveda. Dhanvantari imparted to them the wisdom of Ayurveda for the betterment of mankind and to help rid it of the suffering of disease.

These legends aren't so far away from the divine origins of the healing arts in contemporary cultures closer to home in the West that Apollo gave us from Greece and Thoth from Egypt.

If you want to delve deeper into the origins of Ayurveda, the three very important texts that all scholars of Ayurveda can't manage without are: the Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita, and Ashtanga Hridayam by Vagbhata.



Unlike some other systems of medicine, Ayurveda is not just concerned with the absence of disease. As Sushruta, a physician in the sixth century BC informs us, you are only considered healthy when your appetite is strong, your tissues (*dhatu*s) are functioning normally, your humours (the *doshas*: vata, pitta and kapha) are in balance, bodily wastes are eliminated well, and your mind and senses experience joy. If these Sanskrit terms pique your interest, head to Chapter 3 for an explanation of the dhatus and Chapter 2 for the basics about the doshas.

An extensive body of knowledge describes the therapeutic use of minerals and plants in Ayurveda. Throughout this book, I recommend different herbal remedies for different ailments or as rejuvenating tonics. If you can't find the particular herbs or spices in your grocers, you can find suppliers in Appendix C.

Ayurveda places great emphasis on the effects of the different seasons and your diet on the equilibrium of the body. Different doshas, or attributes, are prevalent at different times of the day, and during the seasons these cause physiological changes in your body. Ayurveda understands that moving with the times and climate is a mainstay of good health because you are a microcosm of what's going on in your environment. I discuss these cadences of time and what you can do to ensure optimum health throughout the seasons in Chapter 9.

Talking of the environment, Ayurveda recognises the importance of the environment to your health: in Ayurveda, everything is part of the same consciousness. How can we be truly healthy when the environment is being brutalised by development, forests are being cleared on a massive scale and farming practices are employed that disrespect the lives of sentient beings?

The food that we eat has often been packaged, chilled and reheated until it contains very little vital force. Your immune system operates at top capacity when your fuel is so poor. Immunity, known as *vyadhishamatva*, or 'disease forgiveness', is the starting point for good health, and Chapter 12 addresses eating the best food to improve your immune system.



Health is described by the word *swastha* in Sanskrit, which means 'to be established in the self'. Health is really moment-to-moment awareness, and this can be obtained through meditation. Details on how you can put this life-changing practice into action are provided in Chapter 6.

Surveying the Scope of Ayurveda

Within the practice of Ayurveda are specialities – just like in Western systems.

Here are the eight primary Ayurvedic specialities (I don't cover all of these in this book – certainly not surgery, you'll be relieved to know!):

- ✓ Toxicology (*agada tantra*)
- ✓ Childhood diseases or paediatrics (*bala tantra*)
- ✓ General surgery (*shalya tantra*)
- ✓ Internal medicine (*kaya chikitsa*)
- ✓ Psychiatry and mental disorders (*bhuta vidya*)
- ✓ Management of diseases of the head and the neck (*salakya tantra*)
- ✓ Fertility treatment (*vajikarana*)
- ✓ Rejuvenation and the treatment of geriatrics (*rasayana*)

Speaking of Sanskrit

Ayurveda cannot be separated from the Sanskrit language. Sanskrit is a sister of Greek and Latin and one of the Indo-European group of languages. It's an extraordinary and very precise medium of expression. More epics, sagas and scriptures are written in Sanskrit than in any other language, including English.

The word *Sanskrit* means 'perfected', or 'perfectly formed'. (In fact, Sanskrit is so rigorous and precise, and hence so unambiguous, that it's used in computer-processing projects in the domain of artificial intelligence.)

The complexity of Sanskrit in its level of sophistication and scientific accuracy is only mirrored by mathematics. The process of perfecting the language has taken thousands of years. In the past, Sanskrit was the language used by all the sciences, which were all orientated towards the study of the self in all its aspects.

The use of the language itself is an instrument for healing. Its beautiful resonances, which you can experience without even having to understand the meaning, can reach the very core of your being. All languages vibrate the being, but Sanskrit somehow enables you to keep currents of energy flowing so that you can enter into and maintain an inner harmony. I've used the Sanskrit terms for this reason throughout the book.

The bible tells us in St John's Gospel that 'In the beginning was the word, and the word was God.' The Vedas concur with this view and say that the whole of creation was *sphota*, or spoken into existence.

In some places in India, medicines are still produced using Sanskrit mantras, because it's believed this makes them really potent and much more deep-acting than ordinary preparations.

The forte of the approach of mainstream medicine is in diagnosis and acute medical conditions such as trauma. If a bus knocks you down, you need to be in the accident and emergency room at your local hospital.

However, in the management of deep-seated chronic ailments, mainstream medicine sometimes lacks the sophistication of Ayurveda, which always takes the underlying causes of pathology into consideration. Ayurvedic interventions can deeply purify your body and eliminate toxins from your system.



Iatrogenic diseases – those that are unintentionally caused by medical treatment – are on the increase and were estimated as being the third-largest cause of death in a study by Starfield in 2000 in the United States. Ayurveda's more subtle and individualised approach to treatment shows no such ill effects. However, I'm not suggesting you ditch your doctor for Ayurveda – far from it. But as long as your doctor is happy for you to follow the remedies in this book, Ayurvedic treatment can be very effective.

Primary healthcare is considered as very important in Ayurveda. This book gives you the tools to stay well throughout your life. In Chapter 6, I give you very simple lifestyle recommendations called *dinacharya*, which keep your diet, digestion and sleep – considered the pillars of your health – in good order.

Locating the Practice and the Evidence

Ayurveda has been the only system of medicine in some rural parts of India for thousands of years. Under the rule of the British, Ayurveda was undermined in the belief that the more mechanistic Western medicine was more efficacious. Thankfully for us, the poor continued to use the tried-and-tested native treatments for their ailments, and Ayurveda survived underground until 1947. This is when India became a free nation and Ayurveda received full recognition as a medical system.

In the past 20 years, Ayurveda has undergone a resurgence. It's now practised all over the world and often works in harmony with a more modern approach. Qualified Ayurvedic physicians are medical practitioners, and many hospitals treat patients using solely Ayurvedic tenets, without causing any of the adverse reactions of modern treatment.

To find a qualified Ayurvedic practitioner near you, see Appendix C.

A wellspring of research is available for those of you who are interested in the science and efficacy of Ayurveda. Over and over again, studies have validated the efficacy of this system using the stringency of Western approaches to research and statistical analysis. To get you started, visit:

✔ www.hindawi.com/journals/ecam

✔ www.oxfordjournals.org (search for 'Ayurveda')

For the countless systemic reviews of Ayurveda, try:

✔ www.systematicreviewinayurveda.org

To begin following the tenets of Ayurveda is to enter a realm that can be truly life-enhancing. Here's to your personal journey.



You're a star: Being at one with the universe

The philosophical system of Samkhya was originated by Kapila around the ninth century BC and laid the foundation for Ayurveda.

Samkhya philosophy is the backbone of Ayurveda and gives you a clear schema for how all things come into being. The word *Samkhya* literally means 'number', and is so-called for reckoning up the 25 entities (*tattwas*) that make up the universe. According to this understanding of reality, there's a continual flow into 'becoming' in all life, from the finest essence to the corporeal world.

This idea was mirrored in the West by the Greek philosophers in the phrase *panta re*, which means 'all things flow'. The early sages had the same notion, using the term *samsara* to mean the 'world of becoming'.

Charaka, an Ayurvedic physician and one of the main commentators of Ayurveda, tells us that 'Each individual is the unique expression of a recognisable finely tuned cosmic process occurring in space and time.'

Putting it in modern terms, Newton, in his first law of thermodynamics, states that the sum total of energy in the universe does not diminish or increase, but continuously transforms itself from one state or level of vibration to another as the flow of life manifests itself into many forms.

Because you are formed of the same substance as the creation, you are truly a microcosm of the universe.