

WHAT IS AYURVEDA ?

Shrikant Bahulkar

The Ancient Indian Medicine is called in India as Ayurveda 'sacred knowledge of life'. The word Veda denotes the most ancient religious work of Aryan people, the first recorded word of Man and, according to Indian tradition, the source of all knowledge. The word Ayurveda suggests that the Ancient Indian Medicine is as sacred and pure as the Veda is. According to Indian tradition, this knowledge of Medicine has come down to us from the gods. The myth apart, one can assume that the knowledge of medicine has its beginning in the remote past. The origin of the medical tradition could be traced to the Vedic literature. This medicine was almost magico-medical practice. Despite the magic element - which is called *Mantra* - we find the element of scientific knowledge in the scattered data on the medical Botany, physiology and pathology. The word Ayurveda is peculiar. It shows that Medicine is not only the diagnosis and treatment of disease but it is a way of life. Like most of the Ancient Indian sciences and arts, Ayurveda also has a firm foundation of philosophy. Ayurveda maintains that the human physis is of prime importance in view of leading life happily. The physis is tormented by physical disorders and mental sufferings. Hence Ayurveda prescribes a way to obtain physical and mental health. Ayurveda insists that the study of medicine is to be done not just to cure disease, but to prevent disease. Accordingly, the works on Ayurveda commence the treatise with a chapter describing the way of life that prevents disease.

Ayurveda believes in the Indian theory of prebirth and inexorable Law of *Karman*. It maintains that certain diseases are caused as a result of bad deeds in the previous birth. Such diseases are almost incurable. Ayurveda appreciates and prescribes a way of life based on religious philosophy. However, the science is not involved in philosophical riddles.

Āyurveda is an eight-fold system of medicine (*aṣṭāṅga*). Basically, they seem to be eight kinds or techniques of medicine, in the course of time, integrated into one system based on the theory of three humours (*doṣa*). This theory of three humours goes through these eight techniques like a thread through gems. At the time of systematization of science the eight special techniques must have been brought together. We shall take a brief survey of these branches of Āyurveda.

The first and one of the oldest branch is 'surgery' (*salya*) to which is normally added the second one called 'treatment of diseases of the head' (*sālākya*). The oldest and yet the most profound treatise on surgery was composed by Suśruta. Before Suśruta there existed specialists of these two techniques. Suśruta, who flourished around the fourth century of Christian Era, brought the two branches together. The tradition of surgeons has come down from the God Dhanvantari, hence the surgeons are called 'the followers of Dhanvantari' (*Dhānvantariya*). After Suśruta, we do not find a good treatise on surgery. The tradition of surgery began to decline after him. There are a number of reasons for this decline. The progress of physiology and biology was impeded by the taboo on contact with bodies, which much discouraged the dissection and study of anatomy. Surgery was regarded to be the last resort. The surgical treatment was given only when it was the only way to save the life of the patient. Study of surgery was also very hard. Though the surgery was regarded to be the first and foremost part of Āyurveda, the practice of Surgery was not very frequent. Surprisingly, however, the science of surgery was much advanced. The caesarian section was known, bone-setting reached a high degree of skill and plastic surgery was developed far beyond anything known elsewhere at that time. Ancient Indian surgeons were expert at the repair of noses, ears and lips, lost or injured in battle or by judicial mutilation. In this respect, Indian surgery remained ahead of

European until the 18th century. It seems that there was no good anaesthetic practice in the surgical treatment. We find a very late, rare and in a sense fictional reference to a plant called *sammohani* that was used as an anaesthetic.

The third branch is 'treatment of ordinary diseases' (*kāyacikitsā*). It goes back to remote past. The experts in this field were called the followers of the sage Atri (*Ātreya*). At present, in India, most of the Ayurvedic practitioners study this branch. The sage Caraka is the father of this system and his work is the first available scientific treatise. This work describes the prognosis, diagnosis, and treatment of a number of diseases, various kinds of medicine and learning and teaching of medical science. The data on the diseases and medicines is surprising. The work shows that the system of medicine had already undergone various and continuous experiments and had been established on the base of theory. In later period, Vāgbhaṭa, the Buddhist physician of the fifth century A.D., brought the two systems (i.e; surgery and medicine) together and composed his own treatise. Vāgbhaṭa achieved a position in the rank of Caraka and Suśruta; thus, these three savants are regarded to be the great teachers of Ayurveda (*vṛddhatrayī*). Modern physicians use Vāgbhaṭa's book - *Aṣṭāṅgahṛdaya* - as a textbook for medical students, for it follows a methodology of scientific treatise based on the classical works of Caraka and Suśruta.

The fourth branch is 'treatment against demoniac possession' (*bhūtavidyā*). This technique has almost disappeared from the usual practice of Ayurveda. Ayurveda regards that certain diseases are caused by evil spirits, sorcery or curse and, in that case, general medicine is of no use. It is possible to say that the diseases that were not perfectly detected were treated to be demoniac possession. A student of history of Ayurveda will find that the treatment against demoniac possession gradually declined as the science made progress in diagnosis.

Other parts of Āyurveda are 'treatment of child-diseases' (*Kaumārabhr̥tya*), 'antidotes to poisons' (*agadatantra*), 'the science of rejuvenating the body' (*rasāyana*) and 'the science of acquiring sex-strength' (*vājīkaraṇa*). Indians had knowledge of the techniques for easy delivery and child-care. Various causes of and treatment for poisoning were known. Species of poisonous serpents and plants are mentioned in the medical books. The knowledge of medicine for promoting sexual vigour was later utilised by the works like *Kāmasūtra*. The use of mercury is rather late. It seems that Indians came to know the use of mercury from Arabs or Greeks, but they developed the science on their own. The drugs produced from mercury are of miraclous effect. This practice of medicine sometimes played a role of alchemy and entered the Yogic and mystic cults of India such as *Nātha* cult, *Vajrayāna* cult and other Tāntric sects.

Medical science developed under the patronage of benevolent kings and religious foundations. The Buddhist king Aśoka took pride in the fact that he had provided medicines for man and beasts and the Chinese traveller Fa-hsien, in the early fifth century A.D., made a special note of the free hospitals maintained by the donations of pious citizens. Unfortunately we have no detailed information of such establishments. However, it is certain that medicine was taught regularly in the universities like Takshashila and Nalanda and name of *Jīvaka*, a wellknown Buddhist physician, is associated with the University of Takshashila. The growth of interest in physiology through the phenomena of yoga and mystic experience has also promoted the progress of Indian medicine. Like Christian missionary of later times, the Buddhist monk often served as a doctor among the layfolk from whom he begged his food. Moreover, he was encouraged to care for his own health and that of his fellow-monks, and his creed tended towards rationalism and a distrust of the medical magic of earlier times. The development of medicine was also probably

stimulated by contact with Hellenic physicians, and the resemblances between Indian and classical European medicine suggest borrowing on both sides. But the difference between these two classical medicines lies in the fact that the Greek medicine now stands as a primitive data on medical science, while in India, the classical medicine is still practised by Āyurvedic physicians and is recognized by the Government as a scientific medicine.

Though the Allopathic medicine is common in India, importance of the indigenous medicine is realized by people and Government. After the hey-day spread of Allopathic medicine, limitations of that system have come to be realized all over the world. Hence the ancient techniques such as acupuncture in Chinese medicine are being tried in the treatment of certain diseases. In this connection, the Indian science of pulse-examination (*nāḍī-parīkṣā*) should be taken into consideration. Though a few in number, still there are some traditional experts in this technique and they can make perfect diagnosis of disease according their way, without the aid of any modern apparatus like stethoscope. The pulse-examination tells us the imbalance of the three humours, i.e. *kapha* 'phlegm', *pitta*, 'bile' and *vāta* 'wind'. This imbalance is the cause of various diseases. The expert studies the nature of the imbalance and makes the diagnosis. Perfect diagnosis is the base of correct medical treatment. Allopathy is yet unable to find out exact cure for certain diseases such as jaundice, while Āyurvedic physicians claim to have cure of those diseases.

Āyurvedic medicine is comparatively cheaper and yet effective. (The most expensive products from mercury could be an exception). The drugs manufactured from medicinal plants could be used in most of the common diseases. There is a general assumption that the process of cure by Āyurveda is very slow. Comparing with instant cure by Allopathic drugs, Āyurveda is slow in cure. Āyurveda aims at removing

the root-cause of the disease instead of apparant suffering. And it is always a difficult and time-taking job unrooting a tree than cutting the shoots! Ayurvedic phisicians claim to have instant cure by the drugs produced from mercury. However, the process of production is very difficult and expensive. The experts in this field have also become rare.

The Anurveda is getting wider response in India as well as abroad. Every system has its own limitations. A comparative study and proper use of various systems will by all means stimulate the progress of scientific research and life of human being could be happier.

§ Lescure given at Yoga Seminar of the Okii Yoga Institute, Mishima, on November 4, 1978.