

Ayurveda and Its Philosophical Background

Part One

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Ayurveda is profoundly associated with the mystery of life. The flow of life and the stream of intelligence are intimately linked by their origins: in this sense Ayurveda, or “knowledge of life”, harks back to the very first manifestation of cosmic existence.

Charaka defines existence with the term *śāvasta*, meaning “eternal”: in support of that theory, he believes that since there is no interruption in the flow of life nor, consequently, in the stream of intelligence or in its becoming, this confirms the eternal nature of knowledge.

Ayurveda deals with those primordial expressions of nature that emerge from a basic level, which contains them all in an innate manner: since the source of material is eternal, it lays down its origins within the very depths; the same laws that have governed nature since its primordial levels, are eternal and intrinsic laws in the Science of Life and are its load-bearing structure.

In order to define the origin of Ayurveda in historical and chronological terms, we often refer to the beginning of an understanding and systematized drafting of Ayurvedic knowledge, as it was then handed down; with respect to the essence of knowledge, as an expression of the laws of nature, Ayurveda has always been in existence ever since the original becoming of cosmic existence.

Sushruta maintains that Ayurveda, in its essence, is linked with the origin of creation and is, therefore, prior to the manifestation of biological life forms; this assumption again refers to those laws underlying the basic principles of Ayurveda. Given that it describes the diversification of creation in rhythmic and phonetic terms, Vedic literature itself is considered to be an eternal knowledge whose deep-rooted origins are embedded in an unmanifest reality at the basis of life. The chronological definition of Ayurveda, in the sense provided in the first editions of the texts, requires Vedic literature to be examined in detail and, although there are numerous references to diseases and their treatment using Ayurvedic preparations, Ayurveda itself is never actually mentioned. The term *Ayurveda* first appears in the *Aṣṭādhyāyī* by Pāṇini: it is one of the first Sanskrit grammars, drafted in a period between the 7th and 3rd centuries BC.

The *Vedas* often talk about medicine and the existence of a considerable knowledge of drugs for the treatment of diseases: for example, the *Rgveda* and *Atharvaveda* describe the existence of doctors and thousands of therapeutic remedies.

At this stage, I would like to set out a reference framework which will allow us to contextualise the origins of Ayurveda with increasing effect, because the actual understanding of the historical evolution of Vedic knowledge will clear the way to a greater understanding of the Ayurvedic approach to psychopathology.

Atharvaveda is referred to as *atharvani* and with this meaning, an emphasis is placed on the “magical” sense of the evocations and rituals found in Ayurvedic ceremonies: in this way, we obtain an important piece of information, since *atharvani* refers to the evocations within mystical rituals, while the term *angirasi* emphasizes the evocations that aim to create negative elements against the enemies. Over and above the specific characteristics and purposes of *Atharvaveda*, two implicit realities actually emerge.

The first reality relates to the vibrational aspect, i.e. the particular phonetic and rhythmic structure of the *Veda*, which generates effects on other structures with specific vibratory densities: as pointed out by Prof. Tony Nader in his book “Human physiology. Expression of Veda and Vedic Literature” it is the parallelism between the structure of human physiology and the structure of *Veda*, which allows us to understand the deep relationship and order among the objective structures in the material world. “Self-referral, primordial intelligence supports all the objective manifestations with their different qualities and governs their dynamism within the infinite multiplicity in the perfect universal becoming; in its abstract subjectivity, it supports the entire creation of the objective material world. This aspect underlines the constant connection between the material world and the primordial base of all existence: it is a level of unmanifest intelligence, of which the entire universal becoming is an expression; this process of creation and evolution is eternal and eternally governed by pure intelligence in its unified value”.

The second reality refers to the phylogeny of human thought, in the sense that, at the dawn of its manifestation, it was characterised by the correspondence between sign-vibration-sound and the initial semantic structure: in a primordial sense, *Veda* is the description in vibratory terms of the gradual manifestation of Consciousness or *Ātman* where the identity exists between vibration and form of basic manifestations.

These primordial vibrations are the shared heritage of humanity’s collective unconsciousness and represent the basic building blocks of the becoming of the various regions of the cosmos: it is unsurprising, therefore, that the first intuitions emerge from humanity’s collective unconsciousness and thus we find surprising similarities among the traditional medicines from various parts of the world that are far from each other and incapable of having any contact.

It is precisely this evocative or vibratory peculiarity of the medical act, based on intuition-revelation, that places the physician in a pre-scientific era as a descendant of the natural healer; in this sense, the *Atharvaveda* contains descriptions for the treatment of certain diseases through the recitation of *mantras*, and also in the *Suśruta* and the *Charaka* there are several sets of instructions on the treatment of diseases with mantra associated with traditional Ayurvedic therapies.

The theory of the three guṇas of the *Sāṃkhya darśana* was used in Ayurveda in the formulation of the philosophical assumptions and, on an application level, also in the structuring of man's constitution, of the organisation of the constitutions from the psychological point of view and as regards the treatment of psychological disorders. Before going into the merits of the pragmatic aspects related to the three guṇas, we will briefly summarise some assumptions belonging to the school of *Sāṃkhya*.

The primitive level of existence, the primordial nature or *prakṛiti* is characterised by the three guṇas: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. We find references to the three guṇas in Vedic literature and in the *Upaniṣad*, in which they are defined as *aiā* or “non manifest”: in fact, an archaic term for the three guṇas was *ajam*.

The three guṇas are not intended in the sense of qualities, as expressed in the *Vaiśeṣika darśana*: so, not in the sense of qualities that characterise a substance, but they are themselves subtle substances, basic elements, primordial organisers in the make-up of the prakṛti. The guṇas are considered as substances with integrative and dynamic potential, subtle or infinitesimal elements which have no gravity (*gurutva*): therefore, they are intangible, even if they possess an energy quantum (*parimāṇa*) and extension (*paricchinnatva*). The primordial substance or prakṛti is regarded as a *continuum* of real infinitesimal elements and the three guṇas, that emerge from it, are seen as primordial organisers of the entire animate and inanimate universe, as well as themselves being real infinitesimal elements¹.

Even Suśruta observed that *Avjakta*, the primordial nature characterised by the three guṇas, is the basic stage of all creation and represents that level leading to the diversification of all creation on a manifest plane.

Accepting the vision of cosmological evolution and, thus, the evolution of man as presented in the *Sāṃkhya*, Charaka emphasises even further the importance of the three guṇas in connection with the cycle of rebirth by stating that *puruṣa* is impregnated with rajas and tamas to the same extent that he is involved in a continuous process of reincarnation; therefore, Ayurveda recognizes the importance of a primordial nature and of the influence of the three guṇas in the process of cosmogenesis and in establishing life.

Suśruta indicates a further extension to these philosophical assumptions and defines the correlation between the three guṇas and the panchamahabhuta, i.e. the five elements: he states that *sattva* is prevalent in *akasha* and *rajas* is prevalent in *vāyu*; in addition, *sattva* and *rajas* are present in *agni*, *sattva* and *tamas* in *jala* and *tamas* in *prithvi*.

So, we can see that the three guṇas take part together in the formation of the primordial nature and, at the same time, exert an influence over the nature of the five panchamahabhuta, thus laying the foundations for the whole universal evolution and considering all resulting manifestations as an expression of consciousness and, therefore, animate.

It follows that every form on the manifest plane is characterised by a *triguṇatmika* nature in the sense that every form contains the three guṇas, in an integrated way, and these shall provide information about and determine their qualities.

Ayurveda is deeply influenced by Indian philosophical thought: so in order to understand the basics of the classification of psychopathology in Ayurveda, which in its literal sense means “knowledge of life” I think it would be appropriate to outline the relationship between

Ayurveda and the Indian philosophical schools, with particular reference to the *Sāṃkhya* and *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika*.

The concept of life presented in these schools of thought is included within a single cosmological view, in which the phenomenal aspects in the relative field are made up of progressive organisations of the basic levels of cosmic existence.

The organisation of life, in a phylogenetic and ontogenetic sense, is influenced in the Ayurvedic structure by the *Sāṃkhya-darśana* and by the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika darśana*. We will see how, over the last century, the development of scientific knowledge in the field of physics has put forward an increasing number of ideas to confirm Indian philosophical thought, with a profound effect in particular on the metaphysical dimension of human life, on the possible speculations and on the reorganisation of knowledge, as regards the higher psychic functions and psychodynamic aspects and, therefore, for an uncustomary way of looking at psychopathology.

Surendranath Dasgupta² declared: “Medicine was the most important of all physical sciences cultivated in India during the Vedic period and was intimately connected with the physics proposed by the *Sāṃkhya* and *Vaiśeṣika*, and probably provided the grounds for those subsequent speculations found in the *Nyāya-sūtra*.”

In his work entitled *The Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus*, Brajendra Nath Seal³ said that the most important Ayurvedic schools in the field of medicine and surgery, based their knowledge on the teachings of the *Sāṃkhya* using the methods derived from the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* and founded a theory on organic and inorganic compounds. These *darśana* or schools of philosophical thought assumed prevailing importance in the development of the basic principles of Ayurvedic medicine: as a result, I shall give a brief outline here of their fundamental contribution.

It is well-known that many doctors in the West, including some of the most technologically-minded ones, foster to a greater or lesser extent a passion for the metaphysical or philosophical aspects of existence. In the traditional, ancient systems of knowledge – such as those from Egypt, Greece, Persia, India and Asia in general – medical knowledge was intimately bound to theological and philosophical knowledge; in this sense, certain characters who charismatically represented these synergies immediately spring to mind, such as Hermes Trismegistus and Pythagoras.

Nowadays, metaphysical aspects are of interest to only a fringe, though thankfully a broad-based fringe, of medical scholars, especially those in the field of neuroscience. Thanks to the evolution in science, many neuroscientists are re-evaluating the assumptions of Oriental medicine, trying a new decoding through physics: this type of work is leading to the creation of new paradigms within a unitary cosmological view.

Suśruta, the author of the *Suśruta Samhitā* says that in order to understand Ayurveda, a student needs to have some preparation in a number of different branches of knowledge, including philosophy; although the various *darśana* mainly focused on metaphysical aspects, they are to be considered as the basic knowledge of Ayurveda.