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The Tridoshas

The Tridoshas (tri meaning three and doshas being the basic physical energies) are the primary and essential factors of the human body that govern our entire physical structure and function. Derived from the Panchmahabhutas, each dosha – which like the elements cannot be detected with our senses but their qualities can be – is a combination of any two of the five bhutas with the predominance of one. Called Vata, Pitta and Kapha in Sanskrit, these three are responsible for all the physiological and psychological processes within the body and mind – dynamic forces that determine growth and decay. Every physical characteristic, mental capacity and the emotional tendency of a human being can therefore be explained in terms of the tridoshas.

Most of the physical phenomena ascribed to the nervous system by modern physiology for example, can be identified with Vata. Just as the entire chemical process operating in the human body can be attributed to Pitta, including enzymes, hormones and the complete nutritional system. And the activities of the skeletal and the anabolic system, actually the entire physical volume of an organism, can be considered as Kapha.

Each dosha thus shares a quality with another (although there remain slight differences in the nature of shared quality), the third having just the opposite quality. Also, each has an inherent ability to regulate and balance itself, coming from the antagonistic qualities that arise from the doshas constituent elements.

When the doshas are in balance i.e. in a state of equilibrium, we remain healthy. As Charaka, the great ayurvedic sage, explained: "Vata, pitta and kapha maintain the integrity of the living human organism in their normal state and combine so as to make the man a complete being with his indriyas (sense organs) possessed of strength, good complexion and assured of longevity." It is only when that there is imbalance within the three that disease is caused. And since it is the strongest dosha in the constitution that usually has the greatest tendency to increase, one is most susceptible to illnesses associated with an increase of the same.

It is important to realise that these three are forces and not substances. Kapha is not mucus; it is the force that causes mucus to arise. Similarly pitta is not bile; but that which causes bile to be produced. And they are called doshas – literally meaning ‘faults’ or ‘out of whack’ - as they indicate the fault lines along which the system can become imbalanced.

It is equally important to understand that the three doshas within any person keep changing constantly, due to the doshic qualities of specific lifestyle and environment, such as time and season. And that these three are not separate energies but different aspects of the same energy, present together in an infinite variety of combinations, wherein their qualities overlap and interrelate.

Ayurveda however considers only three types of constitution – in monotypes just one dosha predominates, in duo types two have near similar strength, and in the very rarely found third type all three are equally powerful. Within this broad classification, there are in the first category various sub-types that are listed below for easier reference.

Tridoshas: Ayurveda Ayurvedic Dictionary on Diagnosis

Diagnosis

Indian medicine names three main causes of disease – ‘overuse’, ‘disuse’ or ‘misuse’ of faculties; ‘errors in judgement’; and influence of seasonal changes. According to Ayurveda all human diseases can be classified into the seven broad categories, namely:

1. Genetic (Adibalapravritta)

- Consists of ailments as obstinate skin diseases, hemorrhoids, diabetes, tuberculosis and asthma that arise primarily due to defects in the sperm (sukra) of the father – when it is called pitrija or the ovum (sonita) of the mother – when it is termed matrja.
- Undigested food, abnormal behaviour, addiction of any type and stressful situations affect the reproductive elements of both the male and female, resulting in a defective foetus.

2. Congenital (Janmabalapravritta)

- Caused essentially due to nutritional disorder (rasakrita) and unfulfilled cravings of the mother during pregnancy (dauhrdya)
- If diet and / or conduct of the mother aggravates vata, the foetus might end up with deformities as kyphosis (hunchback), blindness and dwarfism; increased pitta may cause alopecia and yellowish pigmentation of skin; and enhanced kapha might result in albinism.

3. Constitutional (Doshabalapravritta)

- Arise out of any dietary or behavioural disturbance brought about by an imbalance in any one of the three vital physical energies (Tridoshas) or the three vital mental energies (Trigunas).
- Thus constitutional disorders are of two types: somatic (Sharirika) & psychic (Manasika).

4. Traumatic (Sanghatabalapravritta)

- Undergoing any trauma causing experience – external or internal – leads to this.
- External trauma is induced by injuries inflicted by sharp instruments and bites of animals or venomous insects.
- Stress and overstrain lead to internal trauma.

5. Seasonal (Klabalapravritta)

- Brought about by changes in the nuances of seasonality.
- Sometimes the body fails to adjust itself to the sudden and abnormal climatic changes – extreme cold might lead to frostbite and rheumatic disease. While extreme heat may cause sunstroke or fever.

6. Infectious and Spiritual (Daivabalapravritta)

- Either born out of natural calamities as lightning, earthquakes, floods and the invisible, malignant forces of nature.
- Or contacted through sexual & physical intimacy and sharing of food, plates, bed, clothes, towels and cosmetics with effected friends & relatives.
- Or as a result of sheer jealousy.

7. Natural (Swabhavbalapravritta)

- Even the healthiest of people are struck by hunger, thirst, sleep, death or senility.
- Brought about by functional, organic and natural changes in the body.

In Ayurveda, physicians try to assess the symptoms of these diseases as much as the nature of ailment and its root causes (nidana). This is of utmost importance in ensuring correct choice of remedial & preventive measures for treatment of the disease. For otherwise, even after therapy, one might not get the desired response and there would remain a chance of recurrence.

The early signs and symptoms (purvaroop) provide useful warnings and the opportunity for taking necessary action before a disease can assume dangerous magnitudes. The main signs and symptoms (roopa) reflect the true nature and intensity of the disease. Another oft used method of diagnosis is exploratory therapy (upasaya) which uses diet, medicines and routines to detect diseases otherwise difficult to diagnose. Acting either against the cause of disease or the disease itself or producing relief. For example a swelling that is alleviated by an oily & hot massage, is obviously caused by an imbalance of vata.

The Malas

Malas are the various waste products of the dhatus produced during the normal metabolic process. The three primary malas being Purisa (faeces), Mutra (urine) and Sweda (sweat). Ayurveda clearly states that only a balanced condition of doshas, dhatus and malas is arogya (good health or disease free condition) and their imbalance is the cause of ill health or disease.

Purisa is the waste left back after nutrients of digested food have been absorbed in the small intestine. While water and salt absorbed in the large intestine, the residue now converted into solid faeces, leaves the body. The consistency of the faeces depending both on gastrointestinal mobility and nature of diet.

The tridoshas must be in balance to ensure normal evacuation. Pitta and kapha help digestion and vata governs the mobility throughout the process. Any discrepancy or imbalance between these can lead to various symptoms of abdominal heaviness or pain, flatulence, constipation or diarrhoea. It may also give rise to diseases as rheumatoid arthritis, osteoarthritis, low-back pain, asthma, bronchitis as well as stomach ulcers and irritable bowels.

Mutra is derived during the course of biological processes within the human body. The first stage of urine formation begins in the large intestine where fluids are absorbed into the system. The entire urinary system (kidneys, uterus, bladder and urethra) takes part in the formation and elimination of urine, regulating the fluid balance in our body and also maintaining blood pressure. Any imbalance of increased or decreased urine, may result in disorders as kidney stones urinary infections, cystitis, abdominal pain and bladder disorders.

Sweda is the third primary mala, and it occurs as a waste product during the synthesis of meda dhatu (fatty tissue). Eliminated through skin pores, it controls body temperature and helps to regulate the electrolytic balance. The channels responsible for bringing the sweat to skin surface are known as sweda vaha srotas. It is essential that normal formation and flow of sweat takes place as otherwise it may lead to skin infections, itching/burning sensation over the body, loss of fluid balance and reduced body temperature.

According to ayurvedic philosophy an individual bundle of 'spirit', desirous of expressing itself, uses subjective consciousness or Satwa to manifest sense organs and a mind. Spirit and mind then project themselves into a physical body, created from the five (Pancha) great (maha) eternal elements (bhutas) – together called the Panchamahabhutas – which arise from Tamas. The sense organs then using Rajas to project from the body into the external world to experience their objects. The body becoming the mind's vehicle, its physical instrument for sense gratification.

The Bhutas combine into "tridoshas" or bioenergetic forces that govern and determine our health or physical condition. While the three gunas (Rajas or activity, Tamas or inertia and Satwa, which balances the first two) or psychic forces determine our mental and spiritual health. Ayurveda is thus a holistic system of health care that teaches us to balance these energies in order to achieve optimum health and well being.

Dinacharya

In order to keep the tridoshas in a state of healthy equilibrium and digestion & metabolism (agni) in proper order, Ayurveda prescribes for each individual a specific daily routine (dina – day & acharya – behaviour). The various stages to this daily routine, influenced by the specifics of your prakriti, that will enable you to make the most out of your life, are:

Arising

Since our biological clocks are attuned to the rising and setting of the sun, it is obviously better to awake at sunrise in perfect synchronisation to the natural clock. An ideal time to let the body cells soak in the strength of a tempered sun to be charged for the day. Drinking a glass of luke-warm water helps flush out all toxins accumulated overnight in the body.

Natural Urges

The last portion of the night being ruled by vata – involved in the process of elimination – dawn is the best time to eliminate the body's physical waste. Proper elimination also helping remove the kapha that naturally accumulates overnight. Defecation once or twice daily is the best. Preferably not immediately after a meal. But urination then is wise. Examine your eliminations each morning and if you notice any disturbance indicating poor digestion, go on a fast. It will allow the body rest to correct the system before disease sets in. Never suppress the natural physical urges as elimination, hunger, thirst, sleep, sneezing, yawning, vomiting, flatus and ejaculation, for it will lead to discomfort and even disease.

Cleanliness

Thorough washing of the limbs, face, mouth, eyes & nose purifies the bodies sense organs. Best done with a bath in clean water, it should accompany brushing of the teeth (should be repeated after every meal), scraping off a toxicated coating of ama from the tongue, occasional gargling of salt water with a pinch of turmeric to keep gums, mouth & throat healthy, proper cleaning of the nose and the ears and washing the eyes with warm water held in mouth for moments (saliva being very good for the eyes). Keep your hair trimmed, nails filed and wear clean clothes. Feel free to use perfumes in moderation and feel good.

Exercise

Either passive like massage or active like aerobics or both as in yoga postures, regular exercise increases the body's stamina and resistance to disease by facilitating the immune system, clearing all channels, promoting circulation & waste disposal, and destroying fat. Done regularly, it can reduce anxiety but become addictive. Depending on age & body type, kaphas can go for heavy exercises, pittas should do it in moderation and vatas should perform yoga and not aerobics. Never exert more than half your capacity, during illness, just after a meal and without rhythmic breathing. Swimming, walking and even laughing are excellent options.

Massage

Necessary for every person, a regular self-massage with herbal oils is usually adequate but needs to be supplemented with professional attention occasionally. It makes the skin supple, controls vata by reducing its cold, dry, light, rough & erratic qualities, enhances blood circulation, encourages quicker removal of metabolic wastes and relaxes the body. Follow the normal direction of hair growth, use a little extra oil over the body's vital parts, massage the scalp and head at least weekly and just the soles of your feet if short of time.

Meditation

Ideal for disciplining the mind and removing stress & strain, it is best done after a quick bath to cleanse yourself. Critical in satisfying the mind's hunger, when done well it is so nourishing that even the body can survive on less. Control of desire, or mental hunger, is the key to longevity and immortality. Anything can be meditation so long it is sincere and heartfelt. The simplest and healthiest involves the sun and its golden colour is deemed the most nourishing and productive.

While this routine acts as a critical shield of defence against the destabilising influences of an external environment, by using selective choice in some of the other factors mentioned below you can easily improve upon the condition of your total health.

Clothing

In shielding from extreme temperatures, it tends to reflect the temperament of the wearer in a society showing growing preponderance of the same. Should always be light & airy, and made of natural fibres as cotton, wool, linen or silk. Always wear clean, and never anyone else's except that of a saint. Since energy is brought into the body through the crown of the head and exits from the soles of the feet – extracting abnormal heat from the system – the polluted energy usually collects in the footwear. So avoid wearing other's footwear, try not to take shoes into the house and walk barefoot whenever possible. And wooden sandals are more healthy than animal skin or rubber shoes.

Employment

Since work consumes at least one-third part of our lives and success or failure in your profession affects self-confidence, self-worth, it is important that the nature of work should match well with your prakriti.

Vata people love work that requires sudden bursts of intense energy. But it tends to exhaust them also. So to balance it off, despite their dislike, they should be in routine jobs, slightly repetitive. Need a soothing home and work environment to smooth out their rough edges. They need adequate rest, specially in the afternoons. And should avoid places where the air is exceptionally cool and dry e.g. the freezing cold inside electronics manufacturing outfits or exceptionally dusty fertiliser mills. The ideal jobs must have enough excitement to hold their interest and sufficient routine to avoid imbalances.

Pitta people are very practical, making good administrators but not original thinkers. By nature aggressive and self-promoting, these realists see everything as a contest that has to be won. Insisting on being in the forefront of all activity, they cram as much work as they can, demanding perfect functioning from their bodies all the time. They do not take delays and obstacles to their plans well and must seriously try to be fair to and keep their professional and private lives separate. They should avoid work that is physically irritating or involves heat (as welding or metal casting) and listen more to others. They should ideally have sufficient challenge to keep them occupied without the stress of severe competition.

Innate Kapha stability and balance makes them great administrators. They must make a conscious effort bring in change or variety to their otherwise staid and routine lives. And ensure that even if work is not physically active, leisure is. Slow to get going in the morning, competition is good for them although they may find it stressful.

Choice of Partner

Ayurvedic wisdom suggests that like types make better mates because of similar mental processes, attitudes and sexual proclivities. Unfortunately, two people of similar dispositions are likely to have the same defects too. Choosing the right partner who will stimulate, inspire you to evolve into better individual thus becomes very important.

Sleep

A state of physical inertia with mental relaxation, sleep promotes proper growth of the self. Night is the natural time to sleep and mid-day catnaps should not be more than 15 minutes long except for the very young, very old, very weak and those intoxicated, diseased, exhausted or traumatised. Avoid having a full meal just before retiring to bed. Sleeping on the right side is the most relaxing and good for yoga. On the left, it is most digestive and increases interest in food, sleep and sex. Sleeping on the back indirectly and on the stomach directly encourages disease. Sleeping with crown of the head facing east and feet into the west promotes the best meditative sleep. Washing the hands, feet & face just before improves sleep. Never sleep in the kitchen and go to bed only to sleep. 6 to 8 hours of daily sleep is essential. The ideal form of sleep is yoga – a state of complete physical inertness with retention of mental alertness & awareness.