

# Ayurveda and Disease

A Philosophical Perspective from Bhagavad-Gītā and Bhāgavata Purāṇa

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**W**hat is it that Ayurveda aims to treat? ME. Who am I? Am I a physical body? Am I the mind? Am I consciousness? Am I a soul or non-material entity? Am I defined by my *karma*? Am I defined by my values and lifestyle? Or am I defined by my diet and environment?

Yes, to all of the above.

Ayurveda incorporates the idea that “You” are all of these things. You are a whole composed of many parts, and are connected through your consciousness to other living entities, nature, the Divine and the Universe.

There are six predominant philosophical systems with their origins in ancient India. The term used for these philosophies is *darśana*, which literally means “perspective” or “point of view.” Seeing a single concept from different perspectives provides a broader grasp of the subject, although it may at times appear confusing. Vedānta or Uttara-Mīmāṃsā was certainly an influential concept at the time the major treatises of Ayurveda were set down.<sup>1,2</sup>

Understanding the living being — WHO AM I, and, what is my connection to the other entities, my environment and the natural cyclic balance of nature from the perspective of Vedānta is therefore a cornerstone of understanding Ayurveda’s concept of health and balance.

Ayurveda is gaining momentum in clinical practice as an ancient system of health care, without the practitioner necessarily accepting it as a scientific and universal explanation of life. This article aims to provide a counterpoint to the strictly clinical view on Ayurveda by examining its philosophical underpinnings.

We shall try to understand Ayurveda from the perspective of Vedānta, by examining Sāṅkhya

philosophy from verses mentioned in *Suśruta-Saṁhitā* (*Suśr.S.*), *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* (*Bhāg.*), and *Bhagavad-Gītā* (*B.Gītā*).

Our premise is that Sāṅkhya<sup>3</sup> is the basis for understanding Ayurveda. Considering the darśanas of Sāṅkhya and Uttara-Mīmāṃsā harmoniously, this article primarily cites the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*’s explanation of Sāṅkhya philosophy. Vedānta presents a perspective on unified reality, and the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, itself considered a natural commentary on Vedānta by Vaiṣṇavites,<sup>4</sup> has a strong emphasis on the unity of powerful (*śaktimān*) and power (*śakti*), which manifest as the *puruṣa* and as *prakṛti* respectively.

The text in *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* about creation of the universe, *pañca-mahābhūta*, *mahat-tattva*, *puruṣa* and *prakṛti* (*Bhāg.* 3.5.22-36);<sup>5</sup> the text in *Bhagavad-Gītā* about the three *guṇas* or qualities — *sattva* (goodness), *rajas* (passion) and *tamas* (darkness) (*B.Gītā* 14.5)<sup>6</sup> are essentially Ayurvedic texts expounded as Sāṅkhya theory. Ayurveda itself is an expansion of the *Atharvaveda*:

*iha khalv āyurved nāmapāṅgam atharvaṁ  
vedasyānutpādyāiva prajāḥ śloka-śata-sahasraṁ  
adhyāya-sahasraṁ ca kṛtavān svayambhūḥ. . . .*

Brahmā created *Atharvaveda* with 100,000 verses in one thousand chapters, and, later divided it further into eight branches of *śalya-tantra* (surgery), *śālakya-tantra* (ophthalmology), *kāyā-cikitsā-tantra* (internal medicine), *bhūta-vidyā* (psychology and disease caused by other entities, demi-gods and spirits), *kaumāra-bhūtya-tantra* (pediatrics), *agada-tantra* (science of toxin removal), *rasāyana-tantra* (rejuvenation) and



*vājīkaraṇa-tantra* (increase of virility and male potency). — *Suśr.S.* 1.1.6<sup>7</sup>

According to the above verse in *Suśruta-Saṁhitā*, Śrī Brahmā is the father of Ayurveda with its various branches. The perspective taken here is that Ayurveda is a scientific system received through ancient Vedic texts. Ayurveda is the science of life, yet it originates from philosophical Vedic texts. Let us explore this connection further.

### Who is the Objective of Ayurvedic Nidāna According to Bhāgavata Purāṇa?

The Ayurvedic practitioner must first diagnose from the inside out, rather than from the outside in.

Beliefs, values, diet, lifestyle, likes and dislikes, and the state of mind indicate the ruling or *pradhāna triḡuṇa* — *rajas*, *sattva* or *tamas*. *Tamas* corresponds to *vāta* tendencies and resides in the lower portion of the body, *sattva* corresponds to *kapha* tendencies and resides in the upper portion of the body, and *pitta* corresponds to *rajas* tendencies and resides in the middle of the body.

Understanding the beliefs, values and state of mind, an Ayurvedic practitioner has the primary understanding of the issue facing the client, since the *triḡuṇas* and the *tridoṣas* are interconnected with the values, state of mind and lifestyle of an individual.

The balance of *triḡuṇas* directly affects what we think, our state of mind and our physical tendencies. Diseases which begin in the mind through our thoughts and activities move outwards, manifesting symptoms of physical disease.

Let's examine the root cause of disease by coming back to the fundamental question, "Who am I?" Ayurveda asks the question "Who am I treating?" rather than "What (disease) am I treating?"

*sthūlāni sūkṣmāṇi bahūni caiva  
rūpāṇi dehīsva-guṇair vṛṇoti |  
kriyā-guṇair ātma-guṇaiś ca teṣāṁ  
sāmyoga-hetur aparo 'pi dṛṣṭaḥ |*

The living entity or soul has a physical body and a subtle or energetic body. The living entity is thus embodied within multiple layers. Due to

one's own mind, thoughts, actions [including diet and lifestyle], the living being therefore selects various bodily existences by his/her own acquired qualities [under the observation of the Divine]. — *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, 5.12<sup>8</sup>

In other words, Ayurveda recognizes the living being as existing on multiple levels. These multiple dimensions from outward to innermost are: the physical body (*sthūla-śarīra*), energetic body (*sūkṣma-śarīra*), mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), and the self or soul (*ātman*). Sometimes ego or identity (*ahaṅkāra*) is considered as another covering overlaying the self.

### Why does the Jīva Receive Vyādhi (Disease)?

First of all, let's consider the role of the living being in action and its results. The living being has a role in creating the results of action, but not as the controller. In the *Bhagavad-Gītā* we find:

*prakṛteḥ kriyamāṇāni  
guṇaiḥ karmāṇi sarvaśaḥ |  
ahaṅkāra-vimūḍhāt mā  
kartāham iti manyate | |*

Due to association with *prakṛti* (nature) in the form of the three *guṇas* the living being has a passive role in action, but due to bewilderment of ego thinks "I am the doer." (*B.Gītā* 3.27).<sup>9</sup>

Some scholars interpret this to mean that we are the RECEIVERS of the results of action and are in fact induced to act based on association with the three *guṇas*. Also in *Bhagavad-Gītā*:

*karmaṇy evādhikāras te  
mā phaleṣu kadācana |  
mā karma-phala-hetur bhūr  
mā te saṅgo 'stv akarmaṇi | |*

You have a right to act [according to your duty] but you never have any such right to the results of action. Do not [consider yourself] the cause of the results of action, nor should you be attached to inaction. — *B.Gītā* 2.47<sup>10</sup>

This apparently complex combination of passive and active involvement in action and its results boils down to two essential concepts:

1. actions result from the influence of three *guṇas*, and are therefore not necessarily

directly under the control of the living being

2. actions themselves are not directly the cause of the results of action.

Leaving aside the question of free will *vs.* determinism, the essence of Ayurvedic philosophy is that actions and their results are due to the influence of *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas* in varying combinations.

... *tatra puruṣaḥ pradhānam*

We receive the human form of body, which is the most important gift bestowed by the *prakṛti* and divine, and is superior to other four kinds of entities. This embodied entity is subject to four kinds of *vyādhi* or diseases. — *Suśr.S. 1. 23*<sup>11</sup>

According to *Bhagavad-Gītā*, we are *jīvas* — infinite and extremely small spiritual beings, covered by sheaths of identity, mind, intellect and the physical body and senses:

*mamaivānśo jīva-loke  
jīva-bhūtaḥ sanātanaḥ |  
manaḥ-śaṣṭhānīndriyāṇi  
prakṛti-sthāni karṣati | |*

The living entity or *jīva* is indeed My eternally constituted fragmental part, and is pulled by the mind and senses, which are situated within *prakṛti*. — *B.Gītā, 15.7*<sup>12</sup>

The concept of the *jīva* as being pulled by the mind and senses is repeated throughout other yoga literatures, and one of the eight limbs of *aṣṭāṅga-yoga* is *pratyāhāra*, or withdrawal of the senses. Involvement of the mind and senses in material nature is considered a cardinal cause of worldly suffering. Ayurveda also enumerates various causes of diseases related to sensory involvement including excessive contact (*atiyoga*), improper contact, insufficient contact (*hīna-yoga*), etc.

The *Bhagavad-Gītā* further explains the constituent elements of *kṣetra* or “the field of action for the living being.” This concept of *kṣetra* implies that the living being is an actor but the options for action are limited by how the stage has been set, which in turn is a product of our past choices and actions. The implication for Ayurveda is that the

influence of our current and previous environment must be understood.

*mahā-bhūtāny ahaṅkāro  
buddhir avyaktam eva ca . . .*

The five great elements, the false ego, the intelligence, *prakṛti*, the eleven senses, the five sense objects, desire, hatred, happiness, misery, the body, knowledge and patience comprise the field of action for the living being (*kṣetra*) along with its various transformations.

— *B.Gītā 13.5-7*<sup>13</sup>

There are three classifications of misery mentioned in *Suśruta-Saṁhitā*, *Bhagavad-Gītā* as well as *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* in separate verses and chapters.

These three classes of *kleśa* (misery or disease) are as follows:<sup>14</sup>

- *ādhyātmika* — Miseries which arise from the mind and body such as disease, mental disturbance, emotional pain, grief, etc.;
- *ādhibhautika* — Miseries caused by other living entities — bitten by dog, snake, worms, insects, suffering caused by war, conflict and the envious or hateful actions of others;
- *ādhidaiivika* — Suffering caused by seasons, environmental extremes and natural disasters — floods, tsunami, snow, extreme cold, extreme rains, extreme heat.

There are some categories which cross over.

### Where does the Western Concept of Virus and Bacteria Fit in?

Diseases that are caused by bacteria, viruses or prions according to modern medical science, could be considered *ādhyātmika*, or miseries arising from the body and mind itself. Mental stress is accepted as causing many types of adverse chemical changes in the body, which may cause depressed immunity and leave the physical body susceptible to infection.

Viruses are in a unique category, since they do not strictly fit the definition of living things — they cannot reproduce or grow, since they are just snippets of RNA which require living hosts to replicate themselves. We can say that viral

infections are definitely *ādhyātmika*, according to Ayurveda, since they are a type of disturbance caused by an agent that changes the function of the body at a cellular level.

In industrial societies we are exposed to various teratogens, carcinogens and mutagens. These poisons are produced by the actions of others (*ādhibhautika*), and can change the function of the body in ways that create dysfunction, disease and death. Modern science is still trying to fully understand how different substances can negatively affect the function of the body both in the present and for our unborn offspring. For now, we can leave aside trying to reconcile these gray areas and focus on the broad categories to understand the Ayurvedic perspective on nature and how the mind and body can be disturbed. Understanding the causes of disturbance is essential to treating their effects.

### Karmic Reasons for Disease

Ayurveda describes that the remote causes of suffering are the various types of actions we have performed in previous births. Along with every living being exists a store of results of good and bad actions. This collection of results, as well as the actions we do to produce them, is called *karma*. We can think of karma like a pair of specialized batteries. One is designed to accumulate positive charges, and the other to accumulate negative charges. We are always simultaneously using the positive energies we have accumulated previously, suffering from the negative energies we may have accumulated, and generating further positive and negative energy for future use. This concept of accumulated negative and positive energies carried over from previous births explains the apparent inconsistency between virtuous and evil action and the apparent quality of life. For example, someone may be born into wealth and power but consistently acts according to lust, anger, greed, envy and other goads of negative action. We look at such a person and wonder, "How could this mean and horrible person enjoy such wealth and power?" The answer is that they had previous accumulated positive

karma. They are now using up this stored positive karma, and in the process of using it up they are generating a substantial amount of negative karma.

Alternatively, someone may appear to be disadvantaged and poor but radiates positive energy and always acts positively. That person may have some negative karma, which is getting burned off, and at the same time they are continuing to increase their store of accumulated positive karma.

This concept of positive and negative karma is the center of understanding the remote cause of suffering, since whatever the type of suffering we experience, there is a remote cause in our own actions accumulated in past births. In short, the effect of action is generally deferred for later reconciliation, and this makes it difficult to connect immediate action with visible current results.

The embodied living entity suffers many miserable bodily conditions, such as being affected by severe cold and strong winds. He also suffers due to the activities of other living beings and due to natural disturbances. When he is unable to counteract them and has to remain in a miserable condition, he naturally becomes very morose because he wants to enjoy material facilities. — *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, 5.14.34<sup>15</sup>

The embodied being takes on the role of enjoyer within this world, and thus enjoys results provided by *prakṛti* in various favorable and unfavorable forms of life according to the three *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*). The cause of these results is one's association with the three *guṇas* or qualities of material nature.

— *B.Gītā* 13.22<sup>16</sup>

### Conclusion

The three classifications of worldly suffering, *ādhidāivika*, *ādhibhautika*, and *ādhyātmika* cover the entire gamut of disease and health issues in mankind. The underlying theory of Ayurveda is that such miseries occur as a result of actions on a stage that continuously changes based on our own actions or karma, repeated birth and death in the universe due to our karma. The involvement of the living being within *prakṛti* or nature is complex and dependent on association with the three *guṇas* of

sattva, rajas and tamas in various combinations. Association with these three guṇas is affected by our choices and actions, and association with various combinations of the three guṇas impels further action in an ongoing chain.

These concepts of suffering or disease as the result of action are not only covered in *Caraka-Saṁhitā* and *Suśruta-Saṁhitā*, but in various Vedic literatures including the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, *Bhagavad-Gītā*, and in yoga literatures such as *Pātañjala Yoga-Sūtra*.

## References

1. Verse references given in the text for citations represent number of verses within the original text. For example, a reference to *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, 3.5.22 refers to Canto 3, Chapter 5, Verse 22, regardless of how the publication cited as a bibliographic reference is organized.
2. Endnote citations have been given in many cases for texts where only the Sanskrit source material is used and the authors have supplied their own translation.
3. Although Sāṅkhya philosophy is described in many different places, the fundamental principles are the same. There are many different concepts some of which are apparently contradictory, and as typical with such topics in ancient Indian philosophical systems, one is expected to harmonize them.

For example, in the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* Mahā-Viṣṇu is described as the *puruṣa* who injects prakṛti with his glance, thus activating the process of primary creation. Elsewhere, it is described that this *puruṣa* is Śiva.

In Vedānta, it is described that *Brahman* never undergoes any transformation, so the contact with prakṛti is arguably against the principle of *avikāritva* or non-transformability of the indivisible *Brahman*.

These concepts fit together when Śiva as Śambhu or Sadāśiva is considered a non-different manifestation of Mahā-Viṣṇu who comes in contact with prakṛti, thereby fitting in his own special category. The unity of Śiva and Viṣṇu is described in various Purāṇas and specifically in the narration of Hari-Hara given in the *Vāmana Purāṇa* and elsewhere.

So leaving aside such doubts, we can accept the identity of the *puruṣa* as Mahā-Viṣṇu in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* as an accurate understanding of Sāṅkhya philosophy as understood by the ancient sages who originated the science of Ayurveda.

4. From *Garuḍa Purāṇa*: *artho 'yam brahma-sūtrānām* —

the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* gives the import of *Brahma-Sūtra* (the *Vedānta-Sūtra* of Vyāsadeva). Thus the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* is often accepted as a natural commentary on Vedānta.

Note that this quotation from the *Garuḍa Purāṇa* does not appear in any currently published editions, but is cited by two prominent commentators: Jīva Gosvāmī (sixteenth century CE) in his *Bhāgavata-Sandarbha* (*Tattva-sandarbha* verse 21); and by Ānandatīrtha (also known as Madhvācārya, twelfth century CE) in his *Bhāgavata-Tātparyā-Nirṇaya*.

5. *Śrīmad-bhāgavata-mahā-purāṇam, sthūlākṣara mūla-mātram* (Sanskrit) (Gorakhpur, India : Gita Press, 1976), 2033 Vikram Era, pp. 99-100.
6. Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaj, *Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā* (Mathura, India: Gaudiya Vedanta Samiti, 2000) pp. 793-796.
7. K.R. Srikantha Murthy, *Illustrated Suśruta Saṁhitā*, vol. I (Varanasi, India: Chaukhambha Orientalia, 2008) p. 4.
8. V.P. Linnaye and R.D. Vadekar, *Eighteen Principal Upanishads*, vol. I (Poona, India: 1958) also available on [sanskritdocuments.org](http://sanskritdocuments.org)
9. Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaj, *Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 235-36.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 162-63.
11. K.R. Srikantha Murthy, *Illustrated Suśruta Saṁhitā*, vol. I, p. 8
12. Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaj, *Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 839-44.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 736-38.
14. V.S. Apte, *The Practical Sanskrit-English Dictionary* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1978) entry for *tāpa-trayam*, p. 468.
15. *Śrīmad-bhāgavata-mahā-purāṇam, sthūlākṣara mūla-mātram*, p. 243.
16. Bhaktivedanta Narayana Maharaj, *Śrīmad Bhagavad-Gītā*, pp. 763-65.

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The primary goal of Ayurvedic medicine is to help people live long, healthy and balanced lives without the need for prescription drugs, complicated surgeries or suffering through painful conditions. In fact, the very word Ayurveda itself means something in Sanskrit similar to "lifespan build on knowledge" or "science of life." Although people living in India have relied on traditional Ayurvedic medicine practices to heal everything from infertility to digestive issues for centuries