

Living a life well lived – Ayurvedic and Yogic approaches to nurturing the soul's journey

By Dr. Shaun Matthews

How should I live my life so that I will have no regrets at its end? How can I live a life that is replete and whole, a life where I feel I have lived to my fullest potential? Not a perfect life, but a life of meaning that satisfies my individual needs and aspirations. So that at the end of my life when I take my last sigh, I can look back over my life with a sense of self-acceptance and a readiness to move on.

These are some of the central concerns of Ayurveda, the traditional system of healing that has arisen in the Indian subcontinent over the past 6,000 years. Ayurveda supports us to live in harmony with the natural forces of the world, living life with the flow rather than against it. It looks at our relationship with the food we eat, the weather and the people around us as well as our relationship with ourselves and our physical bodies.

In addressing the question of how to live a life that is innately satisfying at the deepest level, Ayurveda offers four aims that we should be mindful of as we go about the process of living. These are known as dharma, artha, kama and moksha in Sanskrit, the language of ancient India.

Dharma, at the level of the individual, refers to that path through life that allows us to express ourselves fully and completely. It is a calling to honour and actualise our uniqueness as a human being. It is sometimes translated as livelihood, doing those things that enliven us and keep us energetic. Honouring one's dharma may well involve moving out of our comfort zones, facing our fears and challenging our assumptions, but there is also a sense of this is what I am meant to be doing in this life. Our dharma not only contributes to our own personal wellbeing but it also is beneficial for our families and communities.

In my own case, an aspect of my dharma has been to teach and practice Ayurvedic medicine in the west. Along the way I have been privileged to meet with a wonderful array of students and colleagues. The friendships that have developed as a result of my commitment to Ayurveda have been a rich source of satisfaction and support for me. My commitment to Ayurveda has also moved me to study its sister sciences Yoga, Vedic astrology and Vedic architecture. The knowledge and understanding I have received from these traditions has further enriched my life as well as the lives of my family and friends.

For some people it may be their dharma to devote themselves to motherhood, for others it may be through being a builder or a magazine editor. What matters, it would seem, is the deep sense of satisfaction that we derive from what it is we do. Our dharma enables us to find out where our own individual thread fits into the overall tapestry of life.

When we are living in tune with our personal dharma, our life-force, called Prana in Yoga, is immeasurably stronger. We feel more energised, our physical health is naturally more robust and our capacity to enjoy life is greater. By way of contrast, living out of alignment with our 'dharma', will make life more difficult for us as individuals. Our physical health is more likely to suffer, our moods will be more unstable and our sense of well-being diminished. Artha, the

second aim of life in Ayurveda, is the means by which we are able to support ourselves in our journey through life. It is sometimes translated as resources or money. In order to follow our dharma, we need to generate an income to pay for our food, clothing and accommodation as well as our family's requirements for education and health. This is seen as an important and proper focus for our attention.

Kama relates to the fulfilment of our mundane desires, such as the desire to enjoy one's children, a beautiful piece of music or a deliciously prepared meal. The satiation of these desires is deemed as appropriate and necessary for our growth as human beings.

Moksha relates to the spiritual domain of our lives and is concerned with such questions as, "Who am I?", "Where was I before I was conceived?" and "What will happen to me when I die?" It involves coming to terms in a meaningful way with the transitory nature of our lives on this planet.

In this way, the Ayurvedic paradigm of life presents us with four principles that can help us to lead the most fulfilling life that we are able to, given our unique individual traits and talents. Principles that require our ongoing attention as we journey through the ups and downs of living in the 21st century. We are called to deal with the challenges in different parts of our lives, including those of finding an appropriate livelihood, gathering resources to support the needs of ourselves and our dependents, being able to enjoy life's simple pleasures and coming to terms with our inherent spiritual nature. To not address these challenges would be to impede us in our journey towards wholeness and self-acceptance.

On this journey through life we need a sound platform of physical and mental health, this is a fundamental concern of Ayurveda and its sister science Yoga. Yoga is a tradition of spiritual disciplines concerned with how to achieve union with the divine. Where Ayurveda is focussed primarily on the physical plane of existence, Yoga is focussed on the spiritual plane of existence. Working together in complementary fashion, both sciences outline how to promote health and wellbeing in our daily lives and to live in harmony with life itself. An inherently holistic approach is encouraged that takes into account the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual levels our lives. The innate connections between these levels is acknowledged and utilised in the approaches of Ayurveda and Yoga.

The basic platform for good health is centred around daily and seasonal routines, so that we become 'established in healthy habits'. This is known as swasthavrtta in Sanskrit. Things that you do for yourself, day in and day out, no matter what might be going on in your life. Activities such as regular and appropriate exercise, times of rest and relaxation and rejuvenating practices such as self oil massage.

Ayurveda also looks at how best to nourish our bodymind using food and drinks that are appropriate for our constitution, the state of our health, the particular season and our age. It understands food in energetic terms and seeks to use food to create a more balanced physiology in our bodyminds. For example when we are feeling hot, dry and irritable in summer we do better having more cooling and moist foods such as fresh fruits and salads. Balancing the body's energies is a central tenet in Ayurveda and this can be done in many ways, including the use of practises drawn from the tradition of Yoga.

Yogic postures known as asanas have profound effects of the bodymind, they help to release accumulated physical and emotional stress, pacify the nervous and digestive system and rejuvenate the bodymind when practised regularly. Although they are essentially physical activities their ability to induce mental and emotional equipoise is well known. To really work with the mind, we need to acknowledge our bodies and begin to listen to their subtle messages.

Through the regular practice of asanas the bodymind becomes more energetic and lively, then to further develop mental stability yogic breathing exercises known as pranayama are advocated. In India it is held that the link between the mind and the body is the breath. Thus through the daily practice of pranayama we become more keenly aware of our breathing patterns. We start to realise when our breath is shallow and irregular and when we have forgotten to breath.

With a more vital physical body and calmer mental functioning, we are now in a position to begin to observe the workings of the mind more closely in our practice of meditation. Meditation is seen as a vehicle for connecting with our essential nature, which is described as timeless and changeless. We learn how to connect with that quiet, peaceful place that resides within all of us and to let go of the petty concerns of the small mind. A deeper understanding of life and death can then emerge.

Integral to this approach is having a teacher of asana, pranayama and meditation who is well able to guide us along this path of mental training and refinement. Both Ayurveda and Yoga are oral traditions, traditions where knowledge is enlivened through connection with a teacher who inspires you to reach beyond yourself. Satsang or 'keeping company with the wise' is an essential ingredient in supporting the soul's journey. Traditionally in India, this would be in the form of an ongoing association with a spiritual teacher or guru, though in a contemporary western context this may take the form of a 12 step program, a personal development seminar or a spiritual or religious group of some kind.

In this article I have outlined some of the basic pillars of Ayurvedic and Yogic approaches to supporting our journeys through life. They offer a comprehensive and holistic paradigm that addresses the many aspects of what it is to be a human being and help us to live a more contenting and enriching life.

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