

Ayurvedic Perspectives on Selected Pathologies

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Ayurvedic Perspectives on Selected Pathologies

*An Anthology of Essential
Reading from Ayurveda Today*

by
Vasant Lad, B.A.M.S., M.A.Sc.

Anthology Compiled by Glen Crowther



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The Ayurvedic

Perspective on Allergies

Asatmya

by Vasant Lad, B.A.M.S., M.A.Sc.

Allergy and intolerance are explained in the Ayurvedic literature as the concept of *asatmya*. “*Aushadha anna viharanam upayogam sukhavaham sahi satmyam*” is an ancient Ayurvedic phrase saying that *satmya* is when a person’s *doshas* accept and adjust to medicines, dietary and environmental changes. *Satmya* means tolerance. *Asatmya*, or intolerance, is when one or more *doshas* do not accept these things and they react, often as an allergy. Intolerance and allergy are conditions of hypersensitivity, a reaction of one or more *doshas* to a causative factor. The root cause is imbalanced *agni*.

Satmya is natural tissue tolerance, or specific immune response. The two most significant factors determining one’s resistance to infection and allergy are *agni* (metabolic fire) and the specific qualities of a person’s *prakruti*. *Agni* maintains our natural resistance and immunity by producing balanced *ojas*, *tejas* and *prana*, which destroy or neutralize any invaders. Certain specific immune responses may produce unpleasant and sometimes very severe hypersensitivity (allergic reactions). The substance (either food or medicine) may be eaten, inhaled, or brought into contact with the

skin and cause the individual to develop a reaction or allergy.

Each *dhatu agni* in the human body regulates the physiological functions of its particular tissue. The elemental components of cells—ether, air, fire, water and earth—govern the structural aspects of the cells, while their derivative *doshas*—*vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*—organize and govern the functional activities of the cells and inter-cellular communication.

When bacteria or toxic substances invade the tissues, *prana* promotes the secretion of *ojas* and *tejas* in the cells. These three subtle energies move to the affected region and either destroy the bacteria or neutralize the toxins with the help of the respective *dhatu agni*. *Ojas* is the essence of all tissues and it plays a primary role in maintaining immunity. It is derived from *kapha* molecules, but it functions along with *tejas* and *prana*. If the *dhatu agni* is inadequate, the invading substance may damage the cells and produce toxic material, called *ama*. This *ama* affects the *doshas* according to the characteristics of the invading substance and the individual’s constitution.

Each of the three doshas interacts with ama to produce local or general reactions of a vata, pitta or kapha nature. The substances that produce these reactions are called allergens. The form an allergy takes depends upon the specific type of allergen and the aggravated dosha (vata, pitta or kapha).

Circulating throughout the body in the bloodstream are molecules of vata, pitta and kapha, proportionate to the ratio of the doshas in a person's prakruti and vikruti. An allergen may be absorbed into the bloodstream and come into contact with these doshic molecules. If *rasa* or *rakta agni* is low, the doshas will react to the allergen, depending upon the strength and qualities of the allergen. This is called *dosharupa*, which is the doshic reaction of the allergy.

The factors that determine whether or not there is an allergic reaction and its severity are:

- *Prakruti dosha* (the amount of any dosha at conception)
- *Vikruti dosha* (current state of a dosha)
- *Dhatu agni*
- Quantity of allergen that enters the body

An important point is that the dosharupa of a prakruti dosha will create a mild allergic reaction, while the dosharupa of vikruti doshas creates severe allergic reactions. For instance, suppose two people have weak *rasa dhatu agni* and they get exposed to a moderate amount of kapha-type pollen. If person A has balanced kapha, he or she will get no reaction or only a mild reaction to the allergen. If person B has high kapha, he or she will have a much more severe reaction, possibly even going into anaphylactic shock if exposed to a large quantity of the substance.

It is the production of toxins (ama) due to poor agni that causes an allergy. There are four types of ama that can be produced:

1. *Rasa Ama* – from unprocessed *ahara rasa*
2. *Mala Ama* – from improper elimination
3. *Ama Dosha* – from imbalanced doshas in the 3rd stage of disease onwards
4. *Mano Ama* – mental toxins from unprocessed, unresolved and suppressed emotions. It is due to low *sadhaka agni* and it reduces clarity.

All occur only if there is low agni in that particular process. Hence, if there is *dosha dushti* (qualitative disturbance of a dosha) but strong agni, there will be no ama, just *nirama* (no ama) doshic disturbance.

Note that a person with strong and robust dhatu agni will generally not have an allergic reaction at all, even if there is vikruti dosha. The only exception is if the person is exposed to a huge amount of the particular allergen and it overwhelms the dhatu agni.

The Role of the Thymus and Spleen in Asatmya

Agni is the first protective barrier against allergens. When foreign organisms or allergens invade the tissues, the bodily cells often respond by releasing substances that cause local blood vessels to dilate and become more permeable. The cell membrane actually secretes an irritant chemical substance that is toxic to the body, a type of ama. This is due to low agni in those particular cells.

These substances that are released are a manifestation of tejas. As they are produced, the tissues become reddened, leaking excess fluids into the interstitial space due to the local reaction of pitta. The swelling produced by pitta is an allergic, inflammatory reaction that is a protective barrier to delay the spread of the invading allergen or microorganism into other tissues.

At the same time, ojas liberates more kapha molecules at the site of the lesion. Thus, ojas and

tejas act together to detoxify the foreign substances that enter the tissues through the lungs or intestinal tract. In this defense mechanism, the thymus and spleen play an important role.

The thymus is a soft, bi-lobed gland located in the chest in front of the heart, behind the upper part of the sternum and just above the pericardium. In Ayurvedic texts, this gland is called *jatru granthi*. It is a predominately kapha gland, located in the kapha site of the chest and is relatively large in children during kapha age. After puberty, it tends to decrease in size and in adult years it may be quite small. The agni of this gland helps to produce ojas, which includes T-lymphocytes that either destroy a bacteria or virus or neutralize toxins. Weakness of this gland may be one of the causes of allergies and can be detected as low energy at the pericardial pulse level.

The spleen, an organ made up largely of lymphoid tissue and located in the upper left portion of the abdominal cavity, is called *pliha* in Sanskrit. It's role is to remove bacteria from the blood. The spleen lies beneath the diaphragm and a little behind the stomach. It is the root of *rakta vaha srotas* (the hematopoietic system) and is filled with *rakta* (blood) and *rañjaka pitta*. It acts as a blood reservoir and stores and filters blood.

Embryologically, the spleen produces red blood cells, but in an adult that function is transferred to the bone marrow. The subtle molecules of *rañjaka pitta* present in the spleen destroy foreign particles and microorganisms. A defective spleen can cause

depleted immunity and such individuals may be prone to allergies.

Assessment of Asatmya (Allergies and Intolerances)

Atopic allergy is defined as a tendency for hypersensitivity to a specific allergen that is inherited as part of the person's genetic predisposition. This *khavaigunya* (weak or defective space) can also be due to childhood trauma, suppressed or unresolved emotional issues accumulated into the organs.

Repressed emotions—such as anxiety, fear, or anger—produce stress. This stimulates the secretion of toxins in the body. Repressed fear, anxiety and insecurity aggravate *vata dosha*. Repressed anger, hate and envy aggravate *pitta dosha*. Repressed greed, possessiveness and attachment aggravate *kapha dosha*. Meditation, breathing exercises (*pranayama*) and stress management are particularly effective in minimizing allergies due to repressed emotions.

Ayurveda places emphasis upon clinical observation of the signs and symptoms of allergy.

The pulse, tongue, nails, skin, heart and lung sounds and other bodily systems are examined thoroughly. The prior health of the individual, as well as the family history, must be taken into account along with the present problem. The person is carefully observed in order to assess prakruti (constitution) and vikruti (the doshic imbalance, which in this case is the type of allergy).

The Role of Ojas in Asatmya

Ojovisramsa	Mild allergies
Ojovyapata	Moderate allergies
Ojokshaya	Severe allergies

Allergy is the great effort of ojas to reach the heart. In *ojo visramsa*, a normal amount of allergen only causes a mild reaction, whereas in *ojo kshaya* the same amount of the allergenic substance can cause a more severe reaction. However even in *ojo visramsa*, a very strong allergen may not allow the processed ojas to stabilize in the heart. This causes very severe allergies and even anaphylactic shock. Hence the emphasis in Ayurveda to protect ojas at all costs. This is accomplished through proper lifestyle and appropriate use of *rasayana*.

Vata type of allergy is due to *vishama agni* (irregular digestion), causing gas, bloating, distention, discomfort and breathlessness. It may create headaches, arthritic changes, sciatica, or hemorrhoids. Pitta type is due to *tiksyhna agni* (sharp digestion), which causes sudden symptoms such as stomach ache, diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, hives, rashes, urticaria, eczema, or psoriasis. Kapha type of allergy is due to *manda agni* (slow digestion) and results in hay fever, cold, congestion, cough, wheezing, or asthma.

Chikitsa (Treatment)

Nidana parivarjana means to avoid the cause. If we know the most common allergens, we should teach the client how to identify them and thereby eliminate the causative factors. These can include household sprays and cleaners, fabrics, animals and foods. However, depending upon the specific nature of the allergic reaction, this may not always be possible. Hence, there needs to be a comprehensive approach to treatment along doshic lines.

Modern medicine treats allergies with antihistamines and steroids, but this is best used to handle acute emergencies. Certain Ayurvedic herbs contain natural antihistamines and steroids. These include ashvagandha, shatavari and licorice (*yashti madhu*), which are good for vata, pitta and kapha respectively as well as aloe vera, cilantro, hibiscus and tikta ghee.

The Ayurvedic approach falls under two categories of *chikitsa*:

1. *Shamana*: Palliative therapy for acute phase of allergies
2. *Shodana*: Detoxification program (including panchakarma) to remove doshic causes of allergies. Panchakarma is only done once the acute symptoms are under control.

Panchakarma and Allergies

Vata from the colon, pitta from the small intestines and kapha from the stomach, can all undergo accumulation, provocation and then spread (*prasara*). During the *prasara* stage, the dosha moves into the *rasa* and *rakta dhatus*. Longstanding, lingering doshas in *rasa-rakta* cause sensitivity to allergens.

By doing *snehana* (oleation), *svedana* (sudation) and massage according to the doshic type, the dosha moves back from *rasa* and *rakta dhatus* to its site. One can see this clinically and feel it in the pulse. Once the dosha has returned home, it can be eliminated by panchakarma (the five actions):

1. *Basti* (medicated enema) for vata
2. *Virechana* (purgation) for pitta
3. *Vamana* (therapeutic vomiting therapy) for kapha
4. *Rakta Moksha* (blood-letting) for blood cleansing
5. *Nasya* (nasal administration) to remove the residual doshas.

During this process, the person eats a cleansing mono-diet such as kitchari and drinks herbal teas in accordance with his or her constitution. Panchakarma should be carried out under the supervision of an experienced Ayurvedic physician or technician. It helps to detoxify the body and build the resistance of the tissues by gradually rebalancing *agni*. Panchakarma is also very helpful in stress management and accelerates the natural healing processes.

Panchakarma helps to eradicate the internal causes of allergies, so that there will not be any future recurrence. A proper *rasayana* according to the person's *prakruti* and *vikruti* is also important following panchakarma.