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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Longevity and Immortality

Although the word “Ayurveda” is often translated as “the knowledge of life,” a more accurate translation is “the knowledge of longevity.” The cherished goal of all ages has been the conquest of death. The desire to stay alive as long as possible is as fundamental to human nature as is its cause: the profound fear of death which lurks in the heart of every living being as the root reason for all other fears. Thousands of years ago the Rishis of India addressed the problem of eternal life, writing their answers to this conundrum in the four Vedas, the collections of hymns which are the oldest existing literary compositions of the human race. The word “veda” is derived from a Sanskrit root meaning “knowledge,” and the Vedas are verily the seeds of universal knowledge which have bloomed into Indian culture.

A famous Vedic prayer states: “Lead me from darkness into light; lead me from untruth into truth; lead me from mortality into immortality.” We lay emphasis on the last clause of this prayer in our study of medicine, for Ayurveda's purpose

The Hidden Secret of Ayurveda

is the systematic transformation of a mortal human into an immortal being. Because students must be freed from disease before they can adequately extract knowledge from the Vedas and employ that knowledge in their own lives in their quest for immortality, Ayurveda was established as an auxiliary to these Vedas. In fact, Ayurveda as it now exists is a collection of the by-products of ancient researches into the elixir of immortality. This ultimate aim of Ayurveda deserves emphasis, for doubts about it exist even in India.

Because everything which is created must be destroyed, since it exists in time, the aim of immortality is to go beyond time. Some Westerners try to cheat death by freezing themselves, but this is mere self-delusion, for true immortality results only when the whole individual body, mind and spirit, is wholly transformed. There is no use of eternal life if, like that of Tantalus or Sisyphus, or of the characters in Sartre's *No Exit*, it is a life of misery and unfillable desires.

The Importance of Being Individual

The message of the Vedas is simple: in every aspect of life, including health, carve out your own niche. Everyone may not choose to aspire to immortality, but everyone does suffer from disease at one time or another during life. Because every human is born an individual, with individual peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, every human requires individualized treatment. The Seers therefore provided “The Knowledge of Longevity” with therapies which can be adapted to fit anyone's requirements, beginning with Ayurveda and continuing through Yoga to Tantra and beyond. In a world made for the masses there is little place for the individual, which underlines

the urgency of Ayurveda's message. Since every person is a unique manifestation of the Creative Energy of the universe, every physician must approach his or her patients with due reverence for the fragment of the Universal Soul which dwells within them.

The complex of body, mind and spirit which constitutes the human being is indivisible until death; life cannot exist if one of these three constituents is absent. Treatment usually focuses on one of these three aspects, however, especially when a malady manifests more pronouncedly in one of them. Ayurveda is that division of the Healing Art which concentrates on the physical body; Yoga uses the spirit to work through ailments; and the domain of Tantra, and those disciplines like Aghora which are beyond Tantra, is the mind. These sciences are not independent of one another; they are one, but their knowledge materializes differently. Which mode of treatment to select for any individual depends on a number of factors, of which the most important is the doctor's capability.

Ayurveda deals with every individual, patient or doctor, on an “as is, where is” basis. The wisdom of Ayurveda waits patiently for a talented student to come and tap into it. Even a dullard who memorizes the texts and sincerely follows their teachings will cure most patients, though he will be handicapped by the boundaries of his knowledge. A good scholar who has learned the texts will use them as a guide, and will experiment with the therapies she has been taught. Both approaches, of tradition and of innovation, are useful and effective in their own ways. Ayurveda embraces such a wide