

The mind of Ayurveda: A conversation with a legend - Raghavan Thirumulpad

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Smt S. Jalaja interviewing Raghavan Thirumulpad

We often seek complex solutions to simple problems. This is especially true of healthcare, with its formal institutions, specialized doctors and complicated procedures. Unaffordable costs and shortages of medical resources are forcing us to search for ways of managing today's health crises. Here is the story of a man who has combined the traditional knowledge of Ayurveda with Gandhi's ideals to offer an especially relevant alternative. Ayurveda ("knowledge of Life") is among the oldest knowledge systems. It describes three humors (*Vata*, *Pitta* & *Kapha*) corresponding to three bodily functions (movement, transformation and storage), the *Panchamahabhuta* (five elements of air, space, fire, water and earth) acting upon them, the seven tissues and the three *malas* or excretions from the body. Ayurveda is a holistic way of living in which the mind, the body, diet and exercise act together to contribute to one's state of health. Any vitiation leads to imbalances which need to be corrected through regulation of diet, exercise and mind and bodily functions.

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Having learned about this simple holistic concept of health, I had a desire to meet a real practitioner. I was impressed with a recent interview of Vaidyaratnam ('jewel amongst the practitioners') Raghavan Thirumulpad, so I arranged to meet him. Now nearing ninety, he lives in a modest house in Chalakudi, Kerala with his family. Clad only in *khadi* cloth, he looked frail and wizened. His eyes, however, were sharp and alert, reflecting an intelligent and active mind. With the aid of his son, he narrated the story of how he learned Ayurveda: "I stumbled into it fortuitously. My family was poor and, being the eldest, I had to support it. I didn't have a proper job after graduating from school in 1937 and spent two years tutoring schoolchildren while learning Sanskrit, Tharkam (rhetoric, polemics) and mathematics. I got a clerical job with Indian Railways in Madras. After a year, I was diagnosed with tuberculosis. I didn't respond to medication and was brought back home. My neighbor and guru, Venkitachala Iyer, took me to Vasudevan Nambeeshan, who cured me with his treatment. On Mr. Iyer's advice, I accepted Nambeeshan as my guru to learn Ayurveda. I lived with his family, cooked their food, and helped their children with their studies. The guru usually taught me at night when he was free". The poverty and deprivation of his childhood, (his mother sold buffalo milk to support her six children) and the need to learn difficult subjects at an early age sharpened his intellect and helped him perfect his knowledge through scholarship, reflection and practical experience. "As I had prior knowledge of Sanskrit and related subjects, it was easy for me to comprehend Ayurveda. I learnt *Ashtanga Hridaya* in four years. I then passed a government examination and was registered as an A-class Medical Practitioner.

His life after learning Ayurveda took an unexpected turn. "It was the period of the independence movement. I was attracted to Gandhian ideals". Gandhi's principles of Trusteeship and Sarvodaya shaped his worldview. Trusteeship implies that one's wealth and knowledge should be shared with others and Sarvodaya entails the upliftment of all. Instead of treating illness with money, hospitals or drugs, he sought to enable people to take charge of their own health by discovering "the doctor within". Thirumulpad's treatments are known for their simplicity

and accessibility to the poor. He has practiced from his home for the past fifty years and, as advised by his guru, only uses herbs available in his neighborhood. In spite of his age, people throng to see him for treatment and counseling or simply to pay their respects. No specialized hospitals, equipment or medicine, no massage parlors or spas. What a relief!

Thirumulpad has written numerous books, articles and pamphlets on Ayurveda, health, and religion. He writes not only for others but also for his own fulfillment. He believes that the mind, like the body, needs regular exercise. "I also teach students Sanskrit and Ayurveda without charging fees." Often, his students' doubts stimulate his writing. His works are simple and clear and his explanations methodical. His commentaries on *Ashtanga Hridaya* are not mere translations, but expressions of a reflective mind constantly searching for new ideas as it delves into the depths of its knowledge, sharing insights with all who seek to receive them. He has received numerous accolades, including the state government's awards for the best practitioner and best science writer.

Ayurveda has undergone profound changes as it imitates modern medicine in the mass market for its survival. His views on this are surprisingly contemporary and pragmatic. "This was [true] even in ancient times. It is natural in the development of a science for, without timely industrialization, Ayurveda could not have survived. Any industry, for that matter, cannot survive without profit. Of course, there are ethical issues and there should be sufficient regulation. There is a proverb in Sanskrit, which states "Business is a mix of good and bad". Having complete faith in Ayurveda, he perceives no threat from modern developments. "Removal or avoidance of causative factors is the core of Ayurvedic treatment. This logical approach is not followed by modern medicine. Ayurveda counters the causative factor by applying *pathya*, i.e. corrective life and food. This is not adequately stressed by modern medicine. He states "*Vinapi beshajairvaydhib pathyenaiva*

nivartate na hi pathayivibinasya beshajanam satairapi" broadly meaning - those who adhere to *pathya* are cured without medicines. But without *pathya*, no cure is possible with even a hundred medicines.

About the need for validation, he said "There is nothing to fear about the scientific validity of Ayurveda as it was evolved through experimentation over several centuries. It is still being corroborated through clinical experiences. Validation may even contribute something new to Ayurveda. Research is in fact "re-search" of what is hidden in our texts that will nourish Ayurveda. Ayurvedic texts are rich in theories and practices, more of which could be put into practice. There is comparatively less need for innovation. Acceptable factors from modern medicine can also be incorporated".

Of the future, he said, "Only Ayurveda will survive the times even though it may change its form. This is because its theories are broad-based and sustainable. Systematic learning, understanding and propagation of Ayurveda will protect it from corruption during such transformation". His message to the younger generation was, "*Shashtra*" (the System) is maintained by *adheeti* (learning), *bodha* (understanding), *acharana* (righteous conduct), and *paracharana* (propagation among lay people and practitioners), so it is the responsibility of the young to carry out the mission in tune with the times".

Thirumulpad's brilliance lies in his synthesis of Ayurveda and Gandhism. In providing a simple solution to the complex problems of healthcare, he has found Ayurveda's advocacy of the use of knowledge for the common well-being in harmony with Trusteeship and Sarvodaya. He has recognized that Gandhi's call for people to live in tune with nature and take responsibility for their own well-being reaffirms Ayurvedic principles. He has only done this by attaining a higher level of consciousness through his lived experiences and a complete understanding of the ageless basis of Ayurveda. It could be said that his is the mind of Ayurveda.