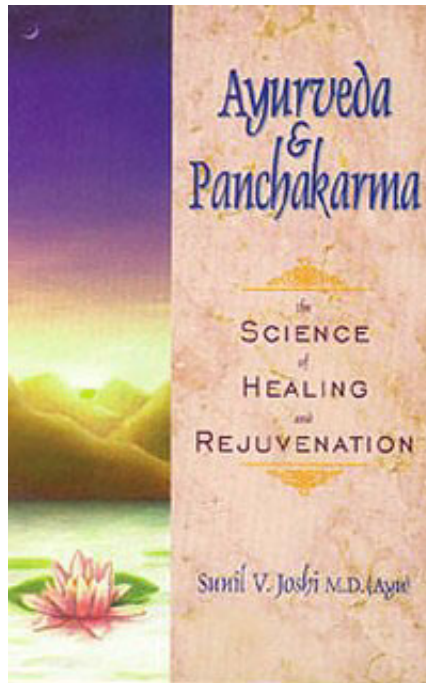


# Sunil Joshi

## Ayurveda and Panchakarma

Reading excerpt  
[Ayurveda and Panchakarma](#)  
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## INTRODUCTION

From India, land of the *Veda*. For longer than mankind can remember, India has been the custodian of this timeless wisdom of the totality of life. From the perspective of *Vedic* knowledge, no aspect of life is disconnected from its source. Every expression of human endeavor, whether it be music, art, architecture, mathematics, agriculture or medicine, is structured in the eternal laws of nature which govern and order our existence.

As a child growing up in India, I had a traditional education and was exposed to many aspects of these *Vedic* sciences, but the area that really captured my imagination was health. From a young age I was fascinated by the human body. I wanted to see inside it and find out how it worked. I would often sneak into hospitals and, from hidden vantage points, watch the doctors perform surgery. I also realized, even as a boy, that I had a strong desire to ease the suffering of others.

Seeing my preoccupation with health, my father told me the story of my great, great grandfather, Shankarji Joshi. Shankarji was a famous *vaidya*, or Ayurvedic physician, renowned throughout India for his skill in this ancient healing science. His entire life was dedicated to bringing health to the people of his area, and he did so until he passed on at the age of ninety-six. It was said that by the time he was sixty-eight, he had lost many of his teeth and his vision had weakened. He went away for a period and underwent *kaya kalpa*, an ancient rejuvenation procedure documented by the Ayurvedic texts, which not only restored his vitality and eye sight, but also gave him back his teeth.

My father once said that at the time of Shankarji's death, he told his son — my father's father— that he would return to bring

the knowledge of Ayurveda to his people, and that he would come back as the son of Vinayak, the name given to my dear father. Whether I am, in fact, that great soul, Shankarji, is of little consequence. It is, however, his inspiration burning inside me that guided me to the medical profession.

I did not immediately gravitate toward my great grandfather's calling as a *vaidya*. I entered a school that offered training in both Western (allopathic) and Ayurvedic medicine and had to decide between them. Both my parents worked hard as educators, but were not well paid for their efforts. As the eldest son, I wanted to make their life comfortable and financially secure. Western medicine promised greater financial security, adding this incentive to my long fascination with surgery

Around the time that I received my medical degree in Ayurveda my mother became acutely ill. For years she had suffered from amoebiasis, a parasitic infection common throughout India. Treatment by allopathic doctors had only temporarily alleviated her symptoms. Finally, the amoebas had invaded her liver and formed cysts, causing her to enter a life-threatening phase of the disease called amoebic hepatitis. She was admitted to the hospital for intensive care. However, as a result of being treated with powerful but toxic drugs, she began to experience a range of new symptoms, including further metabolic breakdown, leg pain, and headaches. She was so depressed that she begged us to remove her from the hospital. Feeling confused and in fear for her life, we brought her home.

A family friend suggested that we take her to a local Ayurvedic practitioner. We saw this as a last resort, but we had nowhere else to turn. After a thorough examination, Dr. Katti, the Ayurvedic physician, gave her some herbal preparations and strict dietary guidelines. In three weeks she had completely recovered. Now, many years later, my mother maintains good health | and still takes care of her family.

I was deeply affected when I saw my mother respond so quickly to such a simple treatment program after years of suffering through unsuccessful allopathic therapies. My father reminded me that this ancient system of health-care was my heritage, handed down to me from my great, great grandfather. I began to reconsider my direction in medicine. Now that I had my M.D. in Ayurveda, I had to select an area of medicine for postgraduate study and specialization. Until this point, I was committed to pursuing modern medicine, but I started having second thoughts about Western medicine. I was aware of its many achievements, but was also painfully familiar with its shortcomings, especially the deleterious side effects of many of its therapies and the high cost to patients and their families. An inner voice encouraging me to investigate Ayurveda grew stronger in my heart and I decided to study it in depth at the All India Research Institute in Nagpur, a city in central India.

I already knew about some of the significant differences between Ayurveda and the Western approach to diagnosis and treatment. However, as I probed more deeply into Ayurvedic theory and clinical practice, I became impressed by its logic and charmed by the power and completeness of its comprehensive understanding of life. It described a vital connection between individual life and the whole of nature; human life was perceived as a microcosm or intimate reflection of the entire universe.

As I continued my studies, I became fascinated by the area of Ayurvedic science known as *Panchakarma*, a comprehensive system of knowledge and practices to purify the body of toxins and restore it to balance with natural law. In case after case, I watched *Panchakarma* achieve complete remission of disease in patients who could not be helped by Western medicine. In addition, I saw how this science of purification and rejuvenation could take a per-

son with relatively normal health and produce a dramatically greater state of health, happiness and fulfillment. In fact, Ayurveda aims to establish the ability to live every aspect of life to its fullest, in complete conscious connection to nature's infinite intelligence, a state often referred to as enlightenment.

When I first arrived in America, I wondered how different the health concerns would be from those of my country. Aside from the higher incidence of drug and alcohol addiction, psychological imbalance and emotional abuse that seemed to be typical of the West, the problems I began to see were remarkably similar. It seems that no country has been able to escape the negative impact of technological life. The increasingly fast pace of modern life, the growing environmental degradation and the loss of connection to the natural rhythms of life are taking their toll on health and happiness everywhere.

As more and more people are falling prey to the adverse effects of stress, I hear more frequent complaints of disturbed sleep, chronic indigestion, poor elimination and lower back pain. Lack of physical and sexual vitality, chronic fatigue, allergies and the inability to either lose or gain weight are also very common problems. Perhaps the most serious side effect of this growing health crisis in the world is the unhappiness that I witness on the faces of the people who come to see me. So many express strong dissatisfaction with their jobs or relationships and seem to have lost their motivation and enthusiasm for life. As a consequence, anxiety and depression have become all too common.

Almost everyone I see has expressed some feeling of frustration with the health-care systems that are available, invariably remarking that they have tried everything and nothing seems to work. One system might address their complaint as a structural misalignment, another as a biochemical imbalance, and still another as a blockage in the flow of energy. One program recom-

mends fasting, stringent dieting or exercise routines, while others prescribe potent vitamin, mineral or medication therapies.

Though each of these approaches has a convincing logic and may be temporarily successful in alleviating the problem, the symptoms eventually reappear. When this happens, the disappointed patient will then move on to the next health practitioner seeking relief. However, the goal of health and wellness will never be realized if they do not address the root cause of their illness.

The limitations of these health-care practices are not necessarily the fault of the particular system nor the people who practice them. Rather the deficiency lies in the basic slant on health that has been imparted by the objective, scientific orientation that fostered them. In this view of life, matter is given primacy and reality is determined on the basis of sensory experience. In other words, if it can be seen with the naked eye or with the aid of a microscope in a laboratory setting, it is deemed to be real or have validity. Even though this "material" world view has emerged relatively recently in our history, its compelling logic and technological significance has catapulted it into a position of dominance in the world.

When we apply this "objective" logic to the understanding of ourselves and our health, however, at least two significant limitations become apparent. First, it creates an artificial distinction between the observer and the observed. In the real world, nothing exists in isolation and therefore cannot be studied out of context with the rest of life. We cannot separate our body and its functioning from the bigger whole, i.e., the other parts of ourselves as well as the world around us.

Secondly, and very closely related, is the fact that much of life as we experience it is non-material. There is nothing tangible about the things we call the mind, the soul and the spirit, even the senses. Yet these things exert a very noticeable influence on

## **Ayurveda and Panchakarma**

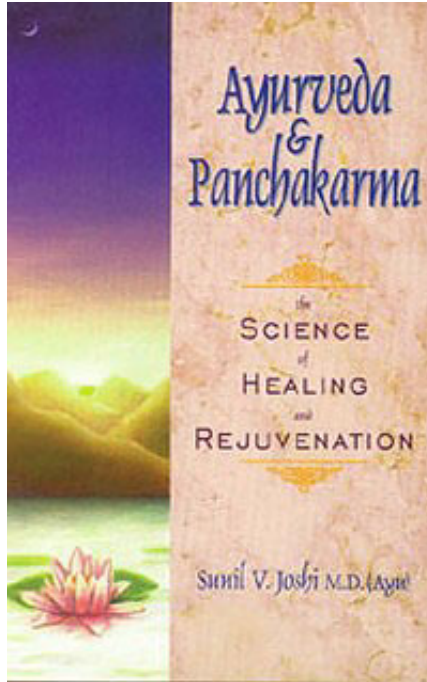
the course of our physical existence. A great many general practitioners acknowledge that the majority of the illnesses they treat in their daily practices have psycho-somatic origins. This means that most diseases are caused or complicated by problems which arise in the mind, an aspect of human life that has no real "objective" reality.

Though many people are beginning to sense the limitation of a strictly body-based approach to their health, they are confused about which way to turn. How do you make your way through the maze of fragmented approaches to find a system that truly works to bring you health, vitality and happiness?

I invite you now to entertain a new, and yet very ancient, view of life and health. In this process, you will not be asked to discard your objective orientation but to expand upon it. This is an intuitive, holistic model of health, where the intangible, as well as the more material aspects of life, are given equal importance, for both are considered to be fundamental to life's wholeness.

Ayurveda is a science that is widely acknowledged to be the world's oldest system of health. It is an oral tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. Only in the last 5000 years was it actually written down. The word Ayurveda comes from the Sanskrit roots *ayu* and *veda*, or, "life" and "knowledge." Thus in the name "Ayurveda," we find its essential meaning and purpose — the complete knowledge of how to live daily life in harmony with cosmic life.

Ayurveda is not just a health-care system but a complete approach to living. It offers a rich and comprehensive conception of life and health that takes into account all parts of human existence, from its most abstract, transcendental value to its most concrete expressions in human physiology. In addition, it clearly upholds the intimate connection between human life and cosmic life.



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