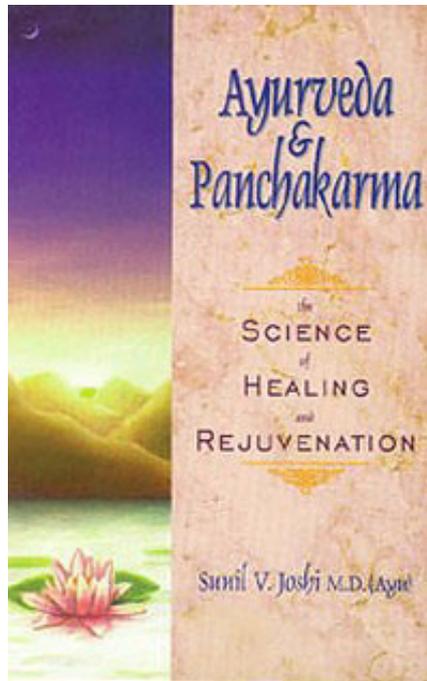


Sunil Joshi

Ayurveda and Panchakarma

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DIGESTION: THE KEY TO HEALTH

With the knowledge contained in the last three chapters, we now have a solid foundation for understanding the actual processes that create and sustain the body. Digestion plays a very key role in Ayurveda's understanding of human health and illness. Though Ayurveda contends that all diseases originate first in the mind, on a physical level this invariably manifests as a breakdown in metabolic function. Because of this, it gives great importance to the process of digestion, whereas modern medicine places much less emphasis on the body's metabolic processes as the source of either health or diseases.

Ayurvedic science offers an elaborate and detailed description of the body's metabolic functions and their relationship to organ and tissue formation. It confirms the importance of efficient food conversion to supply the nutrients which enable each *dhatu* to perform its job. It also recognizes that health requires the proper elimination of the natural by-products occurring from the digestive processes.

A rough analogy can be drawn to a car engine. When fuel combustion in the cylinders is inefficient, the compression lowers and the car responds sluggishly. In addition, carbon produced by incomplete combustion starts to form deposits on valves and other parts of the engine, further damaging the engine's compression and interfering with the car's performance. In a similar manner, if metabolic conversion of food is incomplete, it can produce sluggishness or low energy. The undigested food material also becomes the source for degenerative diseases.

The *Doshas* and Digestion

In the previous chapter we briefly explained that the *dhatu*s are formed sequentially, one being a metabolic refinement of the previous one. Proper formation of the *dhatu*s requires the complete and efficient breakdown of nutrients supplied to the metabolic staging ground of that *dhatu* from the previous stages. It is therefore vital for health that metabolism be strong in all seven stages.

What then is responsible for strong, efficient digestion? As was mentioned in the previous chapter, neither the *dhatu*s nor the *malas* have the specific ability to accomplish these complex metabolic functions. Only *vayu*, *agni* and *jala*, acting as *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha doshas* in the body, possess the specific intelligence sufficient to conduct these processes. Ultimately, everything to do with metabolic function and its relationship to health and disease boils down to the coordinated actions of the three *doshas*.

The disease process starts when the *doshas'* natural relationship becomes imbalanced or impaired. *Doshic* action and digestion are locked in a functional interdependence in which an impairment in one necessarily involves an impairment in the other. When one or more of the *doshas* becomes deficient or excessive in their functioning, indigestion results.

Each *dosha* displays a twice-daily cycle of predominance, reflecting the influence of its respective *bhuta* in the environment. However, when a *dosha's* dominance continues outside the normal time period, it becomes "aggravated." An aggravated *dosha* no longer interacts in a balanced manner with the other two. It overwhelms them and inhibits their ability to perform their respective operations. Whether it's *kapha's* ability to liquefy and bind, *pitta's* capacity to transform, or *vata's* ability to separate and transport, their activity becomes weak or sluggish. The precise coordination of all three of these functions is critical to healthy digestion.

The *doshas* perform many functions within the body, but in

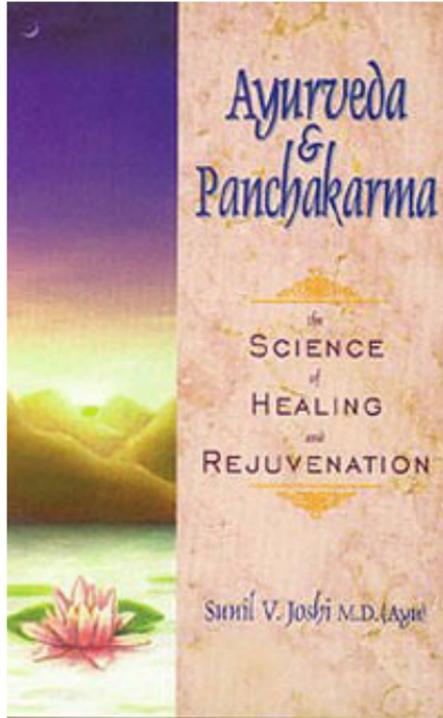
regards to the processes concerned with transforming foodstuffs into nutrients for the *dhatu*s, *pitta dosha* has the most crucial role. The question then arises as to the relationship between *agni*, the vital force in the body and *pitta dosha*.

Relationship Between *Agni* and *Pitta*

A key concept in the Ayurvedic understanding of digestion is "digestive fire," the process responsible for metabolic conversion within the body. Anything having to do with heat, light, conversion or transformation anywhere in the universe is under the control of the *bhuta* or element of *agni*. In the body, however, *agni* turns over some of its functions to *pitta dosha*. Before we proceed further with our discussion of digestion, it will be useful to clarify the roles that *agni* and *pitta dosha* have in the body.

Agni's role in human physiology covers a multitude of functions. It produces vigor and vitality, the glow of the complexion, sight, thermogenesis and the structure of the *dhatu*s. In fact, *agni* is responsible for life itself. In the context of the digestive processes that occur in the G-I tract, *agni bhuta* is called *jathara agni*.

Jathara agni manifests more specifically in the body as the five forms or *sub-doshas oi pitta*. Each of these has a specific metabolic function and location in the body. The most important of these *sub-doshas* for our discussion here is *pachak pitta*, which is found in the lower stomach and small intestine, and is referred to by Ayurveda as the "digestive fire." This function of *pitta* is what is responsible for our appetite and digestive ability.



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