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“Thus Spoke the Sages”

## **Ayurveda on the Environment and Dharma**

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The sages of Ayurveda teach the world, perhaps in the first amazingly perceptive lesson in environmental science, that air quality, water, soil, and time – these four universals and their mutual interaction – are vital enough to cause wide spread havoc, when disrupted. In such a case, thousands of individuals can be simultaneously destroyed by one disease,<sup>i</sup> and this mass annihilation of humanity through epidemics is termed as *janapadodhwansa*.

Further, the sages grimly point the finger back at us humans as the ultimate cause of the imbalance; yes, us humans, and our inconsiderate, self-serving, exploitative, and short sighted actions that indicate *dharma* or loss of all that is right and noble, ultimately leading to the upsetting of natural laws and ungluing of nature’s fragile balance; consequently, over time, instead of protecting us and working for earth’s creatures and our unique requirements, our earth’s natural environment becomes a breeding house of disasters, the sun and the moon behave unpredictably, the seasons change course, and whether we like it or not, in this natural and human created mayhem, diseases thrive and multiply.

### **Life in a Bottle**

Charaka, the Ayurvedic sage and scholar, enumerates details on health management when either or all four factors are simultaneously disturbed. An ancient Ayurvedic text, the Charaka Samhita, expresses points of concern in this regard. “*There are observed the abnormal condition of stars, planets, moon, sun, air, fire and also of the environment which (in turn) derange the seasons too.*”<sup>ii</sup> The text highlights the fact that deranged cosmological and environmental factors will ultimately end up disturbing the quality of food and herbs, and their medicinal properties.

Charaka advises human beings on the management of environment by inquiring into the quality of air, water, land and time. According to sage Charaka, winds that blow not in accordance with season, or blows excessively, or is too moist, too cold, too hot, too rough, too speedy, with terrible howling sounds or whistling sounds, excessively clashing with each other, affected with unsuitable smells, polluted with vapor, smoke or dust and even carrying small suspended particles are considered a destroyer of health and life.<sup>iii</sup>

Charaka cautions that water that has been deserted even by aquatic birds and animals

should not be consumed (even after purification). Polluted water carries smell, color, taste and is sometimes even slimy to touch. It should be avoided at all costs.<sup>iv</sup>

Time, according to Charaka, should be taken as unwholesome when it has signs contrary, excessive or deficient to those of the seasons. Abnormal rainfall or no rainfall, excessive thermal warming, and man-made droughts are all signs of disturbed time.<sup>v</sup>

With astuteness, the sages mention the factors that can disturb the quality of land in which humans reside. These factors are not only natural ones such as frequent earthquakes, tendency to flood, excessive rainfall, being run over by wild animals, reptiles, or killer insects like mosquitoes and locusts, but also manmade, such as when land is polluted by the attitude and values of the humans who reside there.

Ayurvedic texts mention that one should stay away from communities that have abandoned and destroyed virtue as an ideal, that is, dharma has been discarded as a social and personal ideal of the inhabitants, and instead, a free-for-all state of affairs exists.

### **Loss of Dharma Affects the Environment**

Ayurveda conceives of a dynamic and animated model of this universe, where all objects, all beings, all events, all phenomena, and all experiences are inter-connected and vitally linked to each other. In such a mutually interactive state of affairs, human will and human action impact not only the immediate sphere of influence but also the condition of the environment, and actually extend to agitate the entire cosmos.

According to Ayurveda, when we humans choose to discard truthfulness, modesty, and righteousness (dharma), the entire cosmos becomes agitated. Sage Charaka declares unequivocally, "*The root cause of the derangement of wind (vayu), etc is loss of Dharma or unrighteousness.*"<sup>vi</sup> Rivers become violent and change course, meteorites appear frequently, earthquakes shake the terrain and even the sun, moon and stars become enraged.<sup>vii</sup>

Ayurveda regards epidemics and natural catastrophes as the loss of equilibrium of the universal counterparts of the bodily doshas Vata, Pitta, and Kapha, which are Vayu (Air), Agni (Fire), and Soma (water), or to go still further, the three metaphysical forces or fundamental vibrations: Rajas, Sattva and Tamas.

Our 'inner' violence or non-dharmic thoughts and actions towards each other, towards other species, and our abusive dealings with nature, are tantamount to the disturbance of 'gunas' (vibrations in consciousness), which then carry over to rock our 'outer' world, which is our immediate environment. These same vibrations, especially when the entire body of humans collectively cause them, echo out in time to affect even outer space, disrupting the 'dharma' and flow of heavenly bodies, such as planets, stars and meteors, etc.

Today, our world is indeed ravaged by epidemic disease, toxins, addictions, and pollutants. All creatures, including us humans, have become victims of increasing natural disasters, calamities, and ravages of time and technology. Even the frequency of earthquakes, floods, tornadoes, and hurricanes has increased all over the globe.

Sage Charaka's proclamations over nature and environment could well read the same as text from a news story on current affairs in any modern day media. In his ultra 'modern' vision, ancient Vedic sage Charaka traces seasonal vagaries and untimely disruption of seasonal rhythms to the generally non-dharmic approaches, including anti-environmental and anti-nature policies adopted by short-sighted governments, their imprudent heads, or their injudicious

administrators.

In fact, the general unrighteousness adopted by governments and their administrations world over serves to promote and even encourage a pervasive atmosphere of free-for-all unrighteousness, so that even ‘traders’ or commercial interests jump into the mayhem. Soon after, everyday common folk also get caught up in the ensuing rat race and destruction of goodness. In sage Charaka's words, “*Thus, this unrighteousness by force makes the righteousness disappear.*”<sup>viii</sup>

Today, the list of environmental issues due to “short sighted” human activities is growing exponentially, and includes:

**Anoxic waters** — Anoxic event • Hypoxia • Ocean deoxygenation • Dead zone

**Climate change** — Global warming • Global dimming • Fossil fuels • Sea level rise • Greenhouse gas • Ocean acidification • Shutdown of thermohaline circulation

**Conservation** — Species extinction • Pollinator decline • Coral bleaching • Holocene extinction • Invasive species • Poaching • Endangered species

**Energy** — Energy conservation • Renewable energy • Efficient energy use • Renewable energy commercialization

**Environmental degradation** — Eutrophication • Habitat destruction • Invasive species

**Environmental health** — Air quality • Asthma • Electromagnetic fields • Electromagnetic radiation and health • Indoor air quality • Lead poisoning • Sick Building Syndrome

**Genetic engineering** — Genetic pollution • Genetically modified food controversies

**Intensive farming** — Overgrazing • Irrigation • Monoculture • Environmental effects of meat production • Slash and burn • Pesticide drift • Plasticulture

**Land degradation** — Land pollution • Desertification

**Soil** — Soil conservation • Soil erosion • Soil contamination • Soil salination

**Land use** — Urban sprawl • Habitat fragmentation • Habitat destruction

**Nanotechnology** — Nanotoxicology • Nanopollution

**Nuclear issues** — Nuclear fallout • Nuclear meltdown • Nuclear power • Nuclear weapons • Nuclear and radiation accidents • Nuclear safety • High-level radioactive waste management.

**Overpopulation** — Burial • Water crisis • Overpopulation in companion animals • Tragedy of the commons

**Ozone depletion** — CFC

**Pollution** — [Light pollution](#) • [Noise pollution](#) • [Visual pollution](#) • [Nonpoint source pollution](#) • [Point source pollution](#)

**Water pollution** — [Acid rain](#) • [Eutrophication](#) • [Marine pollution](#) • [Ocean dumping](#) • [Oil spills](#) • [Thermal pollution](#) • [Urban runoff](#) • [Water crisis](#) • [Marine debris](#) • [Ocean acidification](#) • [Ship pollution](#) • [Wastewater](#) • [Fish kill](#) • [Algal bloom](#) • [Mercury in fish](#)

**Air pollution** — [Smog](#) • [Tropospheric ozone](#) • [Indoor air quality](#) • [Volatile organic compound](#) • [Particulate matter](#) • [Sulphur oxide](#)

**Reservoirs** — [Environmental impacts of reservoirs](#)

**Resource depletion** — [Exploitation of natural resources](#) • [Overdrafting](#)

**Consumerism** — [Consumer capitalism](#) • [Planned obsolescence](#) • [Over-consumption](#)

**Fishing** — [Blast fishing](#) • [Bottom trawling](#) • [Cyanide fishing](#) • [Ghost nets](#) • [Illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing](#) • [Overfishing](#) • [Shark finning](#) • [Whaling](#)

**Logging** — [Clearcutting](#) • [Deforestation](#) • [Illegal logging](#)

**Mining** — [Acid mine drainage](#) • [Mountaintop removal mining](#) • [Slurry impoundments](#)

**Toxins** — [Chlorofluorocarbons](#) • [DDT](#) • [Endocrine disruptors](#) • [Dioxin](#) • [Toxic heavy metals](#) • [Herbicides](#) • [Pesticides](#) • [Toxic waste](#) • [PCB](#) • [Bioaccumulation](#) • [Biomagnification](#)

**Waste** — [E-waste](#) • [Litter](#) • [Waste disposal incidents](#) • [Marine debris](#) • [Medical waste](#) • [Landfill](#) • [Leachate](#) • [Recycling](#) • [Incineration](#) • [Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#)

And do we have much hope? Unfortunately, not! Thousands of years ago, the perceptive sage of Ayurveda declared that communities such as our current human society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ravaged by above environmental issues, are soon deserted, even by Gods!

Sage Charaka writes, “*And because of this, it does not rain in time, or at all, or there is abnormal rainfall, wind do not blow properly, the land is affected, water reservoirs get dried up and the herbs (medicines) giving up their natural properties acquire morbidity. Then epidemics break out due to polluted contacts and edibles.*” (Charaka Samhita) <sup>ix</sup>

Earnest reader, I have come to a realization that human life is very powerful. Even one single life, yours or mine, has the power to tug at the planets, stir up the clouds, beckon rains, propel mountains and stop everything dead in its track.....if our consciousness so decides.

We live our life not only in nature. We also live in a community of people and our other environment is made up of people – white, black, yellow, and brown in color. Yes, this entire globe with its various pockets of communities of people is our social environment. And what do we find here, except more mutilation by inner and outer war and communities and countries spilling over with mistrust and confusions? Our environment is once again under stress, even as ‘weapons of mass destruction’ are being hunted for all over the world for the sake of ‘peace’.

Ayurveda clearly proclaims that, *“Likewise, unrighteousness a-dharma is also the cause of the destruction of the community by weapons. Those (communities and their leaders) who have excessively increased greed, anger, attachment and conceit; disregarding the weak, (either) attack each other, or their enemies, or are attacked by their enemies resulting in loss of themselves, their kinsmen and enemies.”*<sup>x</sup>

The above statement by sage Charaka puts in clear perspective the moral responsibility of why we may be the target of attack (by other communities, countries, terrorists, or others) and what we should or should not do in response. Perhaps it is not enough to cry in outrage that they did it first! Perhaps, inquiring into what we did first may be more in order? In Ayurveda, the buck stops with us, and before we look at the other, we look to see what vibration we are choosing to put out to begin with. Is our negativity our cosmic garbage? Is our planet polluting our galaxy?

In the environment, be it natural, social, psychological, or spiritual, vibration begets vibration. Before we bothered to speak up, what was the message vibrating away in our quiet silence? Before we proclaimed to ourselves and to the world that we are victims, what about that vibration of subtle aggression that we repeatedly sent out earlier? Before we briskly rise ourselves and passionately rouse others to defend us and our petty self-serving causes, our nation, our ideologies, and our religion (our social environment), should we not first take account of the offending vibrations that we dumped earlier on ‘them’ and the ‘other’, ‘out there’?

Thus, the Ayurvedic sages offered a deeply insightful understanding of our divine life, which is really the manifestation of the relationship between macrocosm (environment) and microcosm (human being). In the end, only dharma prevails. This said, the Ayurvedic sages offered health to the living and breathing planet earth and then to the entire cosmos by suggesting measures that would guide human consciousness to walk only the path of dharma or righteousness, and none other. This ensures the quality of gunas (vibration) that we the people, as a collective entity, send out.

### **Ayurveda’s Path of Dharma**

Ayurveda has constantly emphasized all through these centuries that we humans, collectively and individually, should learn to live in harmony with ourselves, with nature and all its beings. Ayurvedic sage Charaka declares *“One should behave like kith and kin to all living beings”*<sup>xi</sup>

Sage Charaka suggests that to promote righteousness all around, one should work upon cultivating qualities such as truthfulness, benevolence, compassion towards all, spirit of charity, and generosity, practicing calm in all situations, exercising restraint in sexuality, of course protecting the self as self-love is the core of evolved consciousness. Additionally, to train the mind, Charaka suggests seeking the company of celibate sages, listening to their evolved discourses and self-study of scriptures is recommended on a daily basis.<sup>xii</sup>

### **I am the Universe**

*“When one thinks himself spread in the universe and vice versa, and has the vision of the great and the small (mundane affairs); his serenity based on knowledge is not affected.”*  
Charaka Samhita, Sharirasthanam, V, 20.

Ayurvedic sage Charaka explains that seeing the entire universe in the self and vice versa gives rise to true knowledge.

Charaka further explains that after realizing this intimacy of self with universe, such a person not only gleams the spiritual truth and experiences joy and bliss, but also, as a citizen of our earth, begins to deeply respect his/ her natural environment and fellow creatures with whom this wonderful earth is to be shared.

This sense of oneness removes all illusions of separation, and the abuse and misuse that stems from a perception of “separation” also end, naturally and permanently. The limited ego, with its desire to exploit and mindlessly utilize the natural resources for its own selfish continuity, is submerged in an ocean of *unity consciousness* that makes one take care of a random rock from the river, in the same way as one would take care of one’s own body.

Where is the scope of abusing the environment now? Through spiritual vision, one has the potential of becoming a deeply respectful being, dwelling in profound harmony with all of nature and her creatures. This is true health. This is the health guaranteed by sages of Ayurveda, only if, we pause and see and understand what the sages are telling us, and take responsibility towards restoring Dharma in our dealings with each other and our environment.

### **An Inner Awakening**

Ayurveda awakens the powers to heal ourselves within each one of us. If this life is an extension of nature, then why not use nature to be the best we can? Why be at war with nature? Why be suspicious of nature? Why not embrace our natural environment with both hands and find ourselves lost in its compassionate embrace? Ayurveda teaches peace with the internal forces that regulate body and mind, and a peaceful relationship with the external elements that compose our environment.

Ayurveda is indeed based upon remembering, reconnecting, and celebrating the eternal harmony and sacred connections between man and nature. The followers of Ayurveda begin to discover the deep nurturance ever available in nature, and gradually become one with the great cycle and rhythm of nature. It all begins with respecting nature and understanding the basic truth that I and my environment are one, we are each other’s extension, and disrespecting or disregarding one, leads to injury of the other.

### **Ayurveda’s Prescription: All Natural Life**

Thus, Ayurveda supports a non-polluted, clean, and pure environment and deep respect for the natural web of co-dependence and co-respect between man and his universe. Life continues. Never does Ayurveda unfold a dim chart of stressed out progress where pathogens, natural calamities and self-sabotaging thoughts just wait to pounce upon us, and ‘get us good’ when we are not looking.

Due to Ayurveda’s deep belief and respect of nature, correctly prepared Ayurvedic medicine is totally natural, eco-friendly, and utilizes 100%, bio-degradable, ‘life and environment friendly’ ingredients as its tools for healing. Ayurveda promotes a life in which humans interact with nature in a most natural manner, as a child would play in his mother’s lap.

Thus, the science of Ayurveda from ancient India, colors our life with the color of nature – green. It is no wonder that Ayurveda, the original healing science of mankind, counsels us to always restore the natural equilibrium between us and our environment, and bring respect in our



relationship with all living creatures that inhabit our wonderfully alive, interconnected, and dynamic environment.

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- i Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 3 to 18
  - ii Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 4
  - iii Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 6.1
  - iv Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 6.2
  - v Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 6.4
  - vi Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 20
  - vii Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 6.3
  - viii Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 20
  - ix Ibid
  - x Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 21
  - xi Charaka Samhita, Sutrasthana, VIII, 18
  - xii Charaka Samhita, Vimanasthanam, III, 12-18

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#### **About Acharya Shunya**

*Acharya Shunya Pratichi Mathur is Founder of [Vedika Global](#), Inc., a non-profit Vedic foundation that supports an awarded international School of Ayurveda and Vedic Studies, sponsors community welfare initiatives, and delivers charitable wellness through global projects. She is also current President of the California Association of Ayurvedic Medicine (CAAM) and an Advisory Board Member of the Association of Ayurvedic Professionals of North America (AAPNA). For her trailblazing work in reviving Gurukulam system of education in Ayurveda, Acharya Shunya was formally bestowed the Mother Padmavati International Ayurveda Award by the prestigious Institute of Indian Medicine, Pune, India (2010); the Nalanda Award for Excellence in Ayurvedic Education in North America by AAPNA (2010); and was honored by Ayurveda Yoga Upachar Research Activity Foundation AYURA (2013), and, Foundation for Education and Research in Ayurveda and Traditional Systems of Medicine – FERATSM (2009) in India. Acharya Shunya's work has been featured in the San Francisco Chronicle, Yoga Journal, and Tathaastu Magazine. She teaches year-round to medical students and lectures in classrooms, conferences, and seminars worldwide. Read more of her writing on her blog, [Ayurveda Lifestyle Medicine](#).*