

Ayurveda and Parkinson's

One Experience

When I was seven and my bother Doug a year younger, we would sit on our father's lap on the front lawn, each of us propped on a leg as he sat tailor-style in the grass. He would tell us high tales of Australia with great animation. Since none of us had ever been there, Dad was free to elaborate to our hearts' content.

Twenty-six years later in 1985, my father Bob was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease at age 62. One of the first things I noticed about Dad at that time was his lack of animation. It was as if the light had gone out of his eyes. His gestures were less grand, his smile stiffer, his gaze slower to shift from one place to another. To me it looked as if he was slowly freezing, icing into immobility.

Yet with this reduced mobility a noticeable resting tremor in Dad's hands appeared simultaneously. He experienced more difficulty with elimination (constipation) and lower strength and endurance. This was challenging to him, because he was an active person and a former athlete.

I had begun studying Ayurveda a few years before. As many readers are aware, this system of healing arose in India four to five millennia ago, concurrent with the study of Yoga. While Yoga was considered medicine for the consciousness, Ayurveda was utilized to heal physical and mental disorders and to extend the body's lifespan and deep health. Ayurveda made use of all five elements in this nature-based approach to healing, as it still does today. Patients are invited to create *space* in their lives to heal, bringing fresh *air* and *prana* to every cell, enhancing their digestive *fire* and absorptive capacity, cleansing with *water* and steam, and using constituents of the earth to heal—foods, culinary herbs, and medicinal herbs.¹ I knew Ayurvedic medicine had a strong record of working with chronic neurological disorders, particularly through the five actions known collectively as *pancha karma*, so I began to talk with Bob about this option.

However, Bob was relatively conservative in his health choices, and so instead chose a Western medical approach, working with a well-regarded panel of neurologists and the standard medication of the time, L-Dopa, to stabilize his condition. From a Western perspective, Parkinson's Disease results

from a progressive deterioration of the part of the brain known as the substantia nigra; the underlying cause or causes are poorly understood, and there is no definitive cure. Dopamine is produced within the substantia nigra, which plays a crucial role in initiating and maintaining movement. L-Dopa is the biochemical precursor of dopamine, and so giving it in an endogenous drug form can sometimes effect striking improvements in the symptoms of Parkinson's.² In the first few years of Bob's Western medical treatment, his physician observed a 10-15% improvement in his condition.

Pharmaceutical use of L-Dopa, however, was also found to create unwanted side effects, particularly in the form of L-Dopa that was available at that time. Side effects included nausea, vomiting, hypotension, cardiac arrhythmias, involuntary movements, and hallucinations, among others.³ By 1990, after five years of steadily taking his medications, Bob was experiencing night-

marish hallucinations when he tried to sleep. His stiffness and tremors had also slowly increased. He decided he needed to be open to other methods of healing. He chose to work with Ayurvedic physician Sunil V. Joshi, who would later write the respected and influential text, *Ayurveda and Panchakarma: the Science of Healing and Rejuvenation* (1997).

In Ayurveda, one looks at the balance of the three biological energies known as the *doshas*: *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*. While we each have all three of these *doshas*, their relative strength and proportions will vary from person to person. *Vata*, arising from the elements of space and air, gives us flexibility, adaptability, and the ability to move freely, when balanced. When it is not in balance, we may experience stiffness, fear, worry, constipation, or nervous tremors. The *dosha pitta*, coming from fire and water, offers us digestive strength, initiative, and the ability to transform. Out of balance, *pitta* can lead toward inflammation, indigestion, rage, and infertility. Slow, steady *kapha dosha* arises from earth and water, creating stability, endurance, tissue strength, patience, and the willingness to hold healthy routines, when in positive balance. Out of equilibrium, *kapha* can be associated with heaviness, water retention, depression, and chronic metabolic disorders. We each have, and need, all *three doshas*.⁴

Dr. Joshi outlined this play of the *doshas* as he introduced my father to the approach they would take together in meeting Dad's disease and promoting greater health. How much healing can happen depends on many factors of individuals, such as their age, their condition, how long the disease had been present, and how well they adhere to their prescribed regimen. *Pancha karma* is a process of detoxification that separates the toxins and waste products (*malas*) from the essential tissues (*dhatu*s) so that the essential tissues can work more effectively again.⁵ If you imagine the human equivalent of an extremely thorough steam cleaning and tune-up of your car's engine, you can get some sense of the approach.

Bob's *pancha karma* program included *snehana*, oil massage done by two Ayurvedic therapists working on either side of my father, simultaneously, in a very warm room. It utilized



svedana, hot steam therapy with aromatic herbs, in a steam box that would leave Bob's head out in the fresh air, to keep his body warm but his head cool, a key factor in rejuvenation.⁶ It included eating a mono-diet of *kichadi*, the Indian healing stew of mung beans, basmati rice, vegetables, and gentle digestive herbs.⁷ Most importantly it included *basti*, nutritive medicated oil treatments administered to the colon through the anus. While similar in administration to an enema, *basti* does much more than simply to cleanse, as an enema or colonic therapy would. It calms *vata dosha* (as water-based enemas and colonics often cannot) and enhances the colon's ability to both eliminate unhealthy toxins and to absorb essential nutrients,⁸ including electrolytes. This in turn calms people and helps them build energy. My father also received *shirodhara*, a steady stream of warm sesame oil to the forehead, to promote relaxation of muscles and mind; and he received *nasya* treatments, warm medicated oil that he inhaled into his nasal passages.⁹ *Nasya* can help restore physical balance, normal gait, and upright posture.¹⁰

My father also took medicinal herb preparations, primarily hand-rolled pills, specific to his condition.

In Ayurveda, we heal with opposites. Parkinson's disease is primarily a *vata* imbalance, and *vata* is dry, cold, and restlessly mobile by nature, so warm, oily therapies are used for healing, slowly and steadily applied. Bob's first therapy lasted eight days, with daily treatments of oil massage, steam, *bastis*, and *nasya*.¹¹ While I had been confident that Dad would receive some relief from the suffering of his illness, I was not prepared for just how effective the treatment would be. Within four days of beginning treatment, Bob's sleep improved and his nightmares stopped. I noticed that his arms were freely swinging back and forth as he walked, and he was steadier on his feet. His face literally "defrosted": facial expressions I had not seen in years appeared as we talked and laughed together.

On the second-to-last day, my father was given an herbal purgative to clear excess *pitta*, a procedure known as *virechana*.¹² In their closing session, Dr. Joshi delineated Dad's post-*pancha karma* plan, which included a vegetarian diet, Ayurvedic herbs, and several Yoga postures.¹³ Bob's *pancha karma* treatment took place in northern New Mexico at 7,000 feet above sea level.

On returning home to the Chicago area, Bob's progress continued. He stuck with the prescribed diet and herbs, integrating the Yoga poses into the regime of daily stretching that he had done for many years to stabilize his long back and 6 foot 6 inch frame. His good friend and next door neighbor Dan observed, "You're not shuffling," which heartened my father enormously. Dad reported to me at this same time, "I have some stiffness in the morning, yet I can work through it. I'm better, more vigorous. I am exercising like crazy"; this included playing 18 holes of golf at a time.

The Ayurvedic perspective on cleansing and building the body is uniquely different to that of Western medicine. The five elements of nature manifest in our physiology most directly as the three *doshas*, as I have described, and within our senses. These three *doshas* play a role in guarding our essential tissues, known as the *dhatu*s. These seven tissues of plasma, blood cells, muscle, adipose, bone, nerve and marrow, and reproduction are nourished sequentially over a 40-day period, ending in the nourishment of *ojas*, our immune system and vital energy field.¹⁴ Practically, what you do today will not reach your ovaries or prostate energetically for another 35 days, according to Ayurveda. *Pancha karma* cleans the *dhatu*s in this sequential fashion.

A weakness in one *dhatu* can cause problems further along in the sequence of the *dhatu*s. Dr. Vasant Lad, a widely respected Ayurvedic physician and *pancha karma* specialist, has written about the specific progression of Parkinson's through the *dhatu*s in his book, *Ayurvedic Perspectives on Selected Pathologies*. According to Dr. Lad, *vepathu* or

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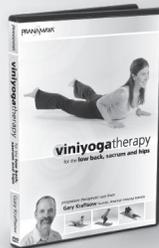


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*(*Annals of Internal Medicine*, Dec. 2005)

kampa vata, as the disease is known in Ayurveda, is a *vata* imbalance that has progressed deep into the tissues. Within the *majja dhatu*, the essential tissue of nerve and marrow, a defective space (*khavaigunya*) appears within the brain. *Vata dosha*, when aggravated in its home site in the colon, begins to accumulate in excess (*sanchaya*), increase (*prakopa*), spread (*prasara*), and, finally, lodge in a localized area (*sthana samsraya*) within the substantia nigra. This aggravation of *vata* affects the person's coordination, posture, balance, gait, and mood.¹⁵

How deep this imbalance extends and how long it has persisted impact how readily and effectively the condition can be healed. In my father's case, he was so excited that he could move more freely, he moved a lot! And this excess of movement did not help his recently settled *vata dosha*, over the long term.

Interestingly enough—according to Dr. Lad, although *kampa vata* is a *vata* imbalance, it most commonly occurs in people with a fiery *pitta* constitution. A combination of stresses creates a *vata* derangement (imbalance), and increased *vata dosha* enters into the *majja dhatu*, creating movement disturbances and involuntary movements, along with a lack of coordination, rigidity, and tremors.¹⁶

Dr. Lad described my father's situation, as he had hundreds of others with *kampa vata*/Parkinson's, in an uncannily accurate fashion. My father, possessing a *pitta-vata* constitution, had been an ambitious and successful executive. In the years immediately prior to his diagnosis, he had experienced the dual shock of an unexpected divorce and a forced early retirement, leading to major *vata* aggravation in the form of his illness.

As Dr. Lad's observations highlight, one's state of mind is part of the healing, as well as part of the illness. Bob, with characteristic courage and humor, carried on, a single man living alone, cooking an unfamiliar diet, taking his foreign herbs. In New Mexico, he had watched me make *kichadis*, mung dals, pots of whole grains, and sautéed vegetables. At home in Illinois, he did his best to replicate this vegetarian diet. He ate oatmeal every other day and grains, beans, and cooked vegetables daily. He reported that he drank lots of fresh milk (probably not all of it warm) and generous amounts of plain yogurt (probably not all of it spiced with pippali—East Indian black pepper—or ginger, as prescribed for him). Once a week he would feed himself a meal of fish, potatoes, and vegetables. Yet, being alone, he admitted he would often just open up a can of vegetarian soup for a meal. He did the very best he could. Poignantly, as the parent of an Ayurvedic cook and self-care educator, these areas were some of his biggest challenges. It was especially hard for him to

prepare enough healthy calories to sustain his large frame. He shed ten pounds he really couldn't afford to lose in the bitter cold Chicago winter, going from 190 pounds to 180. He also experienced considerable intestinal gas with the unfamiliar foods.

Still, he was enthusiastic and planned to return for another series of *pancha karma* the following year. An underlying chronic heart condition combined with the stresses of the high New Mexican altitude derailed his plans. At that time, PK was offered in very few places, and not in his area. He was unable to continue PK as he had hoped. Yet his perspective had been shifted considerably by his experience. He could see that a supposedly irreversible degenerative disease could be somewhat reversed. This informed how he chose to live the rest of his life. Encouraged by the gains he had made, he returned to Illinois, fell in love with a sweetheart from his high school years, tried other, by Western standards unorthodox, methods (including growth hormone injections), and kept on with his life and his six children. Ironically, in his unexpected death three years later, he faced many of the symptoms he had feared, on a much-accelerated time schedule. Driving himself home from lunch at a local deli, he intersected with a police car speeding to the scene of a crime. The police officer was unharmed. Bob died of brain injuries, immobilized, shortly thereafter in December of 1994.

Summary Discussion: Parkinson's disease, or *kampa vata* in Ayurveda, is a *vata* disorder that can particularly target people of *pitta* constitution. Symptoms can often be significantly improved with *pancha karma* and auxiliary therapies. **YTT**

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Photo courtesy of Amadea Morningstar.

What worked in my father's Ayurvedic approach:

- *pancha karma*, including *basti, snehana, svedhana, shirodhara, and nasya*
- Healthy primarily organic diet, high in fiber and low in toxins
- Avoidance of white sugar and caffeine
- Adequate vitamin D¹⁷
- Stretching and breathing
- Regular routines
- Loving relationships
- Ayurvedic herbs, including 1/2 -1 tsp. triphala at bedtime¹⁸

What did not work:

- Overdoing it, working too hard, playing too hard
- Attempting to do it all alone
- Not being an experienced Ayurvedic cook and having access to those resources on a daily basis; e.g., not knowing how to spice foods for ease of digestion
- Not eating enough or skipping meals

Endnotes

1. For a more in depth discussion of the elements, see Joshi, pp. 35-57
2. Devlin, p. 467
3. Ibid.
4. Joshi, 103-128, as well as Morningstar & Desai, pp. 8-20
5. Joshi, p. 59
6. Ibid, pp. 180-193
7. Ibid, pp. 199-201; Morningstar & Desai, pp. 115-125
8. Joshi, p. 228
9. Ibid, pp. 193-194, 212-219
10. Lad, p. 104
11. For more information about these processes, see Joshi, pp. 203-204, 212-219
12. Ibid, pp. 219-225
13. Ibid, pp. 120-156
14. Ibid, p. 60, see also Morningstar, pp. 161-174, 227-236
15. Lad, p. 100
16. Ibid
17. "Vitamin D Deficiency May Be More Common in Parkinson's Disease Patients," October 2008 study reported in *Alternative Therapies in Health & Medicine*. 55% of participants had insufficient levels. www.alternative-therapies.com
18. Lad, p. 104: Triphala acts as more than a laxative. It is regarded as a *rasayana* that eliminates toxins from the body and rejuvenates all the *dhatu*s, including *majja dhatu*, the nervous system. Other classical Ayurvedic herbal medications for Parkinson's include *mahayogaraj guggul* (Frawley, p. 278) and *kapi kacchu* (*Mucuna pruriens*) (Frawley, oral discussion).

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