



Wilderness Ayurveda: A Holistic Medicine for the Modern Era

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Perspective

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Perspective

Ayurveda is likely the most holistic of the traditional healing arts and practices: it is certainly the oldest formal body of applied physical and philosophical medicine. A system of such complexity requires that its doctors study, contemplate, and acquire great skills to even hope to bring their patients into physical and spiritual balance. Equally, a system based on such simple, existential truths can also be grasped intuitively and utilized philosophically as both essential life guidance and metaphor. Because I am certainly not in the former category, I happily confess I am in the latter, therefore being what may be called a “Friend of Ayurveda.” As such, I thank you in advance for your patience as I offer a few thoughts and experiences that link Ayurveda to my professional and personal engagement with the concept of “wilderness.” My premise is simple. Ayurveda is composed of life (*ayas*) and knowledge (*vedas*), both of which are as central to the concept of wilderness as they are to that of Ayurveda, which can be illustrated in many ways.

One of the practical, science-based reasons for setting aside wilderness areas as keystone, natural protected areas is for research in earth sciences, in order to better understand the natural systems and processes that produce what are called “ecosystem services [1]. Simply stated, these are irreplaceable planetary life support systems (*ayas*) such as biodiversity, climate control, temperature regulation, hydrological cycles (and more) that make possible physical existence as we know it. The practice of science depends upon baseline information, against which one can measure change. In our example, we need science to do this in order to understand if/how/why change is occurring in the ecological world, therefore what may be out of balance, how it could affect us, and if and how it should be addressed (*vedas*). A practical example is the migration of plants or animals to different areas or altitudes, these days accelerated by the

rapidly changing climate, and how this change impacts ecological conditions such as forest cover, grasslands, and soil conditioning, all of which greatly affect water supply, temperature ranges, and climate regimes. Therefore, one way of understanding the importance of wilderness is that it is a unique laboratory [2], and the knowledge gained through science conducted in the wilderness is one aspect of “Wilderness Ayurveda” and akin to one aspect in a holistic study of the planetary body.

Additionally, of course, it was in wilderness that medicinal plants evolved and became the basis of ayurvedic medicine for over 5000 years. Modern science finally began to get the message in the late 20th century as “bio-prospecting” was invented and pharmaceutical companies engaged in profit-driven “bio-piracy” through theft of Indigenous Peoples’ knowledge of the healing properties found in wilderness plants. In the same vein, but more benign, we consider such matters as DaVinci and the Wright brothers who observed the dynamics of bird flight to invent mechanical flight, or the study of the tensile strength of the spider’s web that is currently driving the development of high-performance fibers. This practice of “bio-mimicry” [3] is yet another example of Wilderness Ayurveda, using the knowledge (*vedas*) gained through interaction with wild nature to enhance life (*ayas*). But, of course, knowledge is not just physical data. Self-knowledge-what one can understand as the emotional and spiritual alignment of the individual--provides another clear connection between wilderness and Ayurveda. Let’s consider this in two ways, transcendence and therapy.

Wilderness has long been associated with religion and spirituality in what can be described as a transcendence through wilderness. Jesus of Nazareth went into the wilderness for 40 days and nights to mediate, seek his vision, and align himself with his life’s work. Later, as he led his disciples, he was asked how best they could enter the Kingdom of Heaven. The apocryphal gospels (the Dead

Sea Scrolls, our oldest written information) gave an answer-different to that later translated in the New Testament-by quoting Jesus as saying, "Follow the birds, the beasts and the fish and they will lead you in." The Prophet Mohammed, while leading a contemplative life in the desert wilderness, had a dramatic vision in which the Archangel Gabriel announced that he, Mohammed, was a prophet. Gautama Buddha received enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree (*ficus religiosa*) which, while not being in wilderness per se, nonetheless symbolizes self-knowledge through immersion in nature. Indigenous Peoples designate specific wilderness areas as sacred because of their ancestors, their totem animals, and/or as areas for their vision quests. In a more contemporary example, Sir Laurens van der Post-the explorer, writer and godfather to Prince Charles of the United Kingdom, declared that "Wilderness is the greatest cathedral [4].

Of all such examples, one of the more softly accessible is the third principle of Inayati Sufism, simply stated as The Holy Book of Nature:

There is One Holy Book, the sacred manuscript of nature, the only scripture which can enlighten the reader...To the eye of the seer every leaf of the tree is a page of the holy book that contains divine revelation, and he is inspired every moment of his life by constantly reading and understanding the holy script of nature-Hazrat Inayat Khan [5].

The other avenue to self-knowledge in wilderness is through nature-based therapy. At its very simplest, the basic experience of wilderness is enough to initiate change and personal transformation. A long-standing example is that of the Wilderness Leadership School (WLS) in South Africa that conducts five-day walking trails for small groups into the African wilderness. These programmes use "soft-skill techniques" such as journaling, night watch and dream sharing rather than competitive, high-stress activities such as rock climbing, forced marches, or dehydration exercises. Labeled as "primitive" trails because they use no structures and practice "leave no trace" camping, such an experience recognizes Nature as the teacher, not just a classroom....a profound distinction from normal outdoor recreation. Over 65 years the WLS has guided some 60,000 people of all ages, professions, races, and many nationalities, and the most often appearing statement in the participants' reports is, "This experience changed my life [6]. While such experience of wilderness enthusiasts may be anecdotal, there is no lack of scientific studies that demonstrate clear therapeutic benefits derived from experiencing wilderness or elements of wild nature [7]. The formal, programmed use of wilderness for personal growth and therapy began to grow in the 1960's, and by 2000 there were at least 700 groups in the United States alone involved in this field, and the growth rate was about 15% per year [8]. These programmes targeted youth

at risk, adjudicated individuals, and people with physical disabilities, veterans with PTSD; family therapy, all-women groups, and more [9]. This is Wilderness Ayurveda clearly producing results in an individual's life, which always leads to better human society.

There is much more, of course. From one perspective, of science-based nature conservation practice, protecting wild nature – especially the remaining large areas of intact, high-functioning nature on land and seas-is the most cost effective and immediate way to address the three existential threats facing humanity: climate breakdown, species extinction, and zoonotic pandemics [10]. From another perspective, that of ayurvedic medicine, we have the concept of *ojas*, the subtle essence or physical vigour that is necessary for human health, immunity, vitality and strength. According to the Charaka Sanhita, there can be no life without *ojas*. Indeed and there can be no life without wilderness. Such is a very general understanding of "Wilderness Ayurveda," linking the importance of wilderness conservation to a healthier, balanced human being and human society.

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