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SLEEPLESSNESS and MENTAL WELLNESS
ACCORDING TO AYURVEDA,
THE WORLD'S OLDEST HOLISTIC HEALTH SCIENCE



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Introduction

Ayurveda says that the human being is precipitated from a higher, subtler consciousness as soul, and has taken on 'coverings' such as the causal, mental, and knowledge bodies, the respiratory body and finally the human body, to experience Self-realization.

"I and my father are one", said Christ, giving a testimonial of the unity of man (the individual) and humanity (the whole). The aphorism 'as above, so below' reflects the same observation of the direct relationship between the individual and the whole creation.

Human life is considered to express a microcosmic experience of the macrocosmic creation and is said to be composed of five progressively denser elements: Ether (Space), Air (Movement), Fire (Lustre, Transformation), Water (Plasma), and Earth (Solidity). These five great constructing elements of the body and its internal universe, also comprise the outer universe.

Some Sanskrit terminology will appear in this outline, to help the reader grasp the context of Ayurveda's holistic, spiritual approach, and appreciate that human challenges of today have existed throughout history and are so poetically expressed in the ancient medical texts of India.

Ayurveda describes the ‘tripod of life’ as the unity of body, mind, and consciousness. In this article, we’ll focus on understanding the air element’s qualities and actions according to Ayurveda, and its important role in treating sleeplessness, a disturbingly common disorder, noted to be at the root of many expressions of mental illness, such as addiction, bi-polar disorder, depression, schizophrenia, and more.

All mental illnesses may indeed have their roots in sleep disorders, from worries, anxieties, fears, terrors, and traumas, expressed as many types of mental anguish, named by a variety of modern medical labels, and now interfacing with the powerful and pervasive pharmaceutical industry, a for-profit construct. Psychosis is termed ‘unmad’ in Sanskrit, implying the forgetfulness of God.

Knowledge of natural hygiene practices for establishing and re-establishing healthy biorhythms become obscured nowadays, under the influences of forgetfulness of nature-based culture, accumulated unresolved past experiences, and our current day-to-day operating consciousness, within a largely media-driven, secular culture.

Let’s look into ancient Ayurveda for reminders about the logic and practice of taking full responsibility for all our life outcomes, particularly sound sleep.

First the theory:

Ayurveda Cosmology

The air element is the second in density of the five main constructing elements of creation and is associated, together with a predominance of space element, with the subtlest of the three doshas, called ‘Vata’ from ancient Sanskrit.

Prana or life force, expressed as Vata, governs movement, especially within the colon, nervous systems, hormonal, sensory, respiratory, and structural systems, and governs the functions of communication via neurotransmitters, endocrine secretion coordination, and respiratory cycles, among others.

The Invisible Anatomy™ of the meridian, chakra and marma (doorway) systems, which permeate and emanate throughout the auric field, in turn, govern physiological functions such as circulation, peristalsis, elimination, blinking, swallowing, and adaptation to change, etc.

Vata dosha refers to a collective expression of these predominant qualities: dry, light, cold, mobile, subtle, dispersing, rough, and changeable.

Its main physiological sites are the colon, joints, skin (outer and inner), ear canals, and central nervous systems including optic and auditory nerves, endocrine glands, connective tissue, the sensory apparatus, and respiratory channels.

Vata also maintains the auric field of positive and negative electrically charged polarities, governing the movements of the body's autonomic circulation, coordination, and communication functions. Its energy is responsible for all movements, such as the passage of time.

Vata functions throughout the body, mind, and consciousness, as do Pitta (fire and water dominant) and Kapha (earth and water dominant) doshas. Because no defined line of demarcation exists between doshic functions and expressions, they are identified medically by their qualities, actions, locations, and interactions.

The three doshic principles of Vata, Pitta and Kapha are constantly shifting and adapting from morning to evening, from childhood to old age, and from season to season.

To understand how to overcome sleeplessness, the first step is to understand how to keep a balance between the states of action (P), inaction (K), and change or transition (V).

A dynamic equilibrium between Vata, Pitta and Kapha and their qualitative expressions is a constant inner adaptation of appetite, elimination, and sleep, governed by the autonomic nervous systems.

For now, we're setting aside a deeper understanding of both Pitta and Kapha to focus on the importance of Vata systems in restoring sound, satisfying sleep. Later we'll return to Pitta and Kapha doshas.

Vata, when imbalanced, can lead to a variety of possible related symptoms, such as gasses, irregular appetite, constipation, flatulence, forgetfulness, auditory sensitivity, worries, anxieties, a feeling of powerlessness, joint popping, restlessness, weakness, vertigo (objective type), and many more, such as the critical sleep disorder of this discussion.

If unresolved, these Vata disturbances can lead to more chronic imbalances, such as undue fears, terrors, delusions, uncontrolled impulses, stress headaches, delusions, and anorexia. tremors, accidents, forgetfulness, lack of coordination, inability to overcome 'loss', and adapt to change. Vata dosha is a primary effect of sleeplessness.

Vata and Its Five Sub-Expressions

Vata expresses through five principal sub-systems and pathways:

Prana (inhalation, inspiration, exhilaration, assimilation, sensory nourishment)

Udana (exhalation, expiration, speech, voice, effort, ascension, motor communication)

Samana (abdominal digestive oscillations, peristaltic rhythms, nutrient selection)

Apana (pelvic elimination of bowel movement, menstrual & urinary fluids, flatus, fetus)
Vyana (cardiac, lymphatic, thermal, emotional, intentional circulations)

In sleeplessness, the relationships, timings, and coordination of these five sub-doshas of Vata, will influence the neurotransmitter functions of serotonin, melatonin, and dopamine, among others, and also will be influenced by them, as an interaction of cause and effect.

Fortunately, Ayurveda offers an in-depth understanding of the Dina Charya, or the daily biorhythms, to help self-regulate the psycho-biological rhythms, including appetite and elimination, sleep and wakefulness, rest, and activity.

Adjustment and re-training of daily biorhythms is best accomplished by following attunement with nature's primary cycles of sunrise and sunset, hunger and mealtimes, work in the world and fallow times for rest.

Sleeplessness is more in our modern world of overwhelm, so our basic value system of life's priorities is causative to our daily results. The Ayurveda strategy is to remove the causes, bringing a re-evaluation of the right use of time.

Guidelines for life priorities are handed down as God (devotion, spiritual nourishment) first, Family (self is first, then spouse, then parents or children depending upon the age and stage) comes next, then Community (donation is permitted up to 50% when the first two priorities are satisfied) comes last, provided energy, funds and time remain after satisfying the first two priorities.

Health comes under self-care for maintaining family balance. Just as the in-flight instructions are for the mother to place the oxygen mask on herself first, then only her child, is the result of careful study of logic, wisdom and practicality, as compared to knee-jerk reactions coming from unconscious influences, such as societal trends.

In Ayurveda sleeplessness is not just relevant to evening states of mind and being, but belongs to a bigger picture of appetite, digestion, assimilation, elimination, wakefulness, choices, and awareness of our thoughts, feelings, and emotions. All these interface with our relationships, by imbining their qualities into our outcomes.

The bigger picture of daily living includes our acculturation from childhood, trauma management skills, and belief systems. However, everyone can come to the present, and re-train the serotonin, melatonin, and dopamine cycles in favour of sound sleep, in due course.

Now, let's return to understanding that Pitta (predominantly fire and water elements) type of wakefulness is being alert at midnight and unable to fall asleep again until after

2 am. Pitta type of sleeplessness occurs more in job-related stress, career conflicts, hormonal imbalance, and indigestion. Also evident are periods of wakefulness alternating with light sleep, coming to deep sleep only after sunrise.

Kapha (predominantly water and earth elements) type of sleep disorder is associated with sinus congestion, snoring, overweight, metabolic syndrome, lack of exercise and low oxygenation of the red blood cells within the circulatory system, resulting in morning grogginess. This person sleeps better on the side than the back, though they may love to sleep on the tummy, resulting in neck distortion and further respiratory restriction.

Of course, balancing the dosha through diet and lifestyle is the Ayurveda path.

Now the practical application of natural techniques for drugless therapeutics:

Morning Practices:

Pranayama (breathing exercises) and Pranasthana (stabilization of prana)

Ancient, tried, and true yogic breathing practices help retrain the mind's patterns from agitation to calmness, from self-centredness to Self-centredness, and from stress to creative expression.

Everyone can easily practice making each breath deeper, fuller, slower, and more silent, with each successive breath, bringing a slower mind and more space between thoughts, when the mind can rest, refresh and restore.

Practicing alternate nostril breathing, by closing first the left nostril for inhaling slowly and silently to the top of the breath, then switching to closing the right nostril for the exhalation and next inhalation.

Traditionally, the right thumb is used to close the right nostril, the right ring finger is used to close the left nostril, while the index and ring fingers are tucked into to palm, and the little finger supports the ring finger.

Immediately via respiration, the related channels of the central nervous system, endocrine (hormonal) systems and fascial (connective tissue) systems are slowed. The role of fascia is to store unresolved experiences and stress, often resulting in muscle strain and pain, and later in symptoms.

By taking time for deep relaxation, within half an hour, unwinding begins and helps restore comfortable mind/body thoughts, feelings, and emotions.

Note: See Yoga Nidra below.

Walking and Gentle Yoga Stretching

Regular morning exercise in nature and fresh air is part of a healthy daily routine that can help lead to sound sleep in the evenings. Choose whichever exercise is suited to your needs, preferences, seasonal, and practical considerations. Chair yoga, for example, may be done even in a hospital setting, while sitting in bed.

The average person (who is average? you may rightly enquire), benefits from at least 20-30 minutes of exercise daily, giving preference to the morning, and avoiding evening stimulation. Nowadays the gym is busier in the 5-8 pm time frame, despite ancient teachings for morning exercise. The gym emphasizes muscle tone, while Ayurveda and Yoga emphasize morning practices, which then induce more evening fatigue, for holistic and lasting health.

Food Program

The food program is to be based on natural hunger, to eat when hungry and stop when satiation occurs, as evidenced by the first burp of digestion. Food is to fill half the stomach, liquids one quarter, and one quarter is to remain empty, for sufficient air to competently fan the fire of digestion (Agni).

Food is to be sattvic, fresh, local, and soft-cooked for ease of digestion, comprising the six chemical tastes of sweet, sour, salty, bitter, pungent and astringent. Meals are to be taken in quiet surroundings. Food is to be avoided in grief, intense fear, after 6 or 7 pm, in nausea or absence of appetite. The best cook is one absorbed in divine remembrance.

Balance of the tri-dosha of Vata, Pitta and Kapha, is accomplished with personalized food choices, so be aware of the tastes, thermal effects and post-digestive effects of foods to choose a simple, seasonal program of fresh foods, including grains, vegetables, and appropriate herbs and spices.

The science and art of eating is to be restored first and foremost, to help avoid post-digestive symptoms such as sleeplessness. Good digestion, assimilation and elimination are precursors to all indicators of wellness and longevity, sound sleep among them.

Afternoon Practises:

Yoga Nidra

Yoga Nidra is an ancient practice handed down from generation to generation, to help cope with built-up stresses and discomforts, and when used in chronic disease conditions, it helps restore the wisdom of daily relaxation practice.

At least from now on, practice mindfulness, which costs nothing, and pays rich dividends of contentment, satisfaction, and joy. Take time each afternoon to deeply relax for twenty minutes. Even during a busy work day, just fifteen minutes mid-afternoon can provide a calm period in the business of everyday life.

Simply lie with the head eastward, with a pillow under the knees, face up and palms up. Begin a deep, full, silent breathing practice, emphasizing areas of pain or symptoms. Allow any tense areas to let go of stress in a circular, outward-moving pattern as when a pebble hits the pond, and the rings of relaxation move continually outward.

Allow the mind to rest for twenty to thirty minutes without falling asleep, rather than keeping the attention on the relaxation, deep breathing and awareness processes. When the mind is quiet, its decisions are more balanced, as compared to when it's so overwhelmed, that it cannot see clearly. Yoga nidra can be done anywhere safe area, conducive to non-disturbance. It's an easy tool for productivity and well-being to sustain, at home or work.

Turiya Therapy

The Invisible Anatomy™ of Ayurveda refers to the psycho-physiological systems of chakras, meridian systems and marma doorways found within the permeating auric field, to help integrate the unconscious, sub-conscious, conscious and super-conscious minds into one allied awareness of stillness, to help bring awareness of how habits arose, and how they can evolve.

The need or goal of sound sleep is known, and the knowledge of moving from imbalance to balance is contained within the knowing of our being.

Through still-point contacts, the therapist invites the Pranas of the client to stabilize and reveal subtle guidance from within the cellular intelligence to trust one's life path from within. Letting go of undue physical, emotional, and spiritual pain can unfold by itself, especially with an intention (Sankalpa) set according to the needed outcomes.

Cranial balancing protocols involving the centreline pathways help to still the mind's chatter such as obsessions, regrets, fears, and judgements and instead begin to create the desired outcomes of stillness, remembrance of divinity and empowerment from nature herself from within.

Grounding protocols involving hands and feet reflexology techniques can help to restore a sense of wholeness, in place of a feeling of fragmentation. Turiya Therapy is a quick-acting approach, enhancing cumulatively along the journey of knowing yourself. Turiya Therapy is a complete bodywork science and art for the restoration of mental health.

Herbal Supplementation

Fresh, local, wildcrafted herbal medicines are always preferred over extracts, teabags, or processed herbs. Fresh juice of the herbs is ideal. When this isn't practical, tea is the next best form for assimilation, if the herb is out of season, or perhaps only available in dried form.

Herbal teas are to be taken according to one's Prakruti (constitution, genetic type), and Vikruti (the current holistic situation). Know the properties and actions of herbal medicines, and evaluate their suitability to your unique needs, including the strength of the medicine and the strength of your digestive power to assimilate the plant's active ingredients.

The standard tea recipe is one tsp. of the herb for one cup of boiled water, poured into the cup, covered, steeped until the temperature is comfortable, sometimes strained, and sipped at intervals over 5-15 minutes. However, you are not a standard person and must consider your unique needs. Consult your local Ayurveda practitioner, if unsure.

Sedative herbs include camomile, valerian, hops, lobelia, tagar (Indian valerian), dashmoola (ten-root compound), and jatamansi (spikenard). They can be taken singly or compounded in any compatible combination for your unique needs.

Go slowly to find the right match of evening herbs. Mix a small batch only for the week in a glass jar stored away from daylight, and use 1 tsp. per evening cup of tea, taken about 7-8 pm. Use ½ tsp. for a half cup of tea to minimize wakefulness from nocturnal urination.

Evening Practices:

Meditation

Meditation is considered to be the first and last medicine of Ayurveda, because of its capacity to bring awareness to our mental patterns, while providing a context for inner guidance back to a natural diurnal cycle, leading to a restoration of the natural nocturnal sleep cycle, as a foundation for positive and successful results of daily life.

Mindfulness, awareness, and choice are intimately connected. The ability to choose healthy states of mental activity involves intention (Sankalpa), consciousness, and discrimination (Vivek). First efforts at meditation likely will not bring the final goal but begin a journey of daily practice leading to realizing the causes and effects at play in our mental/emotional life habits.

To adjust to evolving habits is to create conducive habits toward sound sleep, sound food choices, sound elimination and sound relationships. Such transitions take time

and practice. Here begins the journey of reining in the mind each evening and nourishing it with higher consciousness in the mornings.

The mental channels including current thoughts are governed by the owner's intentions. Just as you never gave up on learning to walk, now please don't give up on your intention of re-training your sleep and wakefulness balance. If you set about to learn music, you'll be a little awkward to begin with, then with practice, you succeed and improve.

Meditation is shown to be more restorative and therapeutic than sleep itself. So sit quietly when sleeplessness bothers you, with deep, slow, full, silent breathing, to help adjust your brain/body chemistry to restore the sound sleep you once enjoyed as an infant.

Meditation is an opportunity to redefine our can'ts, shoulds, and musts into core beliefs supportive of our long-term best spiritual interest. Mental faculties are meant to be our allies, not our tormentors. Take responsibility to evolve your daily operating consciousness. Your mind is yours alone, and must obey its owner, if not now, then when? Gradually blame, comparison, judgement and delusion weed out by themselves.

Ten Optional Winding-Down Practices

Remove electronic and electrical devices.

Apply comfortable earplugs.

Arrange a bed for the crown to face south or west.

Ensure feet and crown do not face nearby drains.

Remove bedroom mirrors.

Avoid late food.

Sleep 3 hrs. after food, by 9 pm.

Apply 1 tsp. Bringraj oil on the crown, soles, and perhaps navel.

Avoid alarm clock to arise early before sunrise.

Avoid daytime sleeping.

Plan for nighttime temperature shifts with layered bedcovers.

For carousel thoughts, use Bach Flower Remedy flower essence drops of White Chestnut. These can be taken under the tongue or dropped in a little warm water for 10 minutes to evaporate the alcohol, or on the pillow, or rubbed to the soles of the feet. Bach Flower remedies can be used as drugless therapy for helping address 'carousel thoughts', with White Chestnut, to help unwind an obsessive mind.

Up to five drops can be taken under the tongue, or perhaps dropped in a glass of warm water to allow the alcohol to evaporate, or dropped on the bedding for children under twelve. For younger children, use one drop at bedtime.

If available, drink ½ cup warm buffalo milk or fresh cow's milk, boiled with equal water and a pinch of turmeric and nutmeg, at about 8-9 pm, for tryptophane precursor action.

Conclusion

Kindly keep in mind, dear reader, that any winding down measures can be overridden by your mind's activities moving away from the Theta brainwave state (meditative) to the Alpha state (slow-moving thoughts) to the Beta wave state (active, wakeful mind).

Once the mind has resumed active thinking, go back through the stages to apply the principles of restoring the empty mind state, with deep breathing, mantra repetition at intervals, and applying slight pressure to both eyeballs equally.

You are the owner and generator of the thoughts, and they must obey you in due course. They have obeyed you before, to become overactive. Now they will obey you again for this important purpose. Meditation remains the first and last tool for self-mastery.

Time was needed to develop sleeplessness, and time is also needed to develop sound sleep, a feeling of freshness on rising, and enthusiasm for the day ahead.