

A Return to Balance: Why Ayurveda Matters Now More than Ever

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Writer's Statement

Coming into composition as a first-year student, I knew almost immediately that I wanted to write a medical anthropology paper. I love combining the interdisciplines of biology and the physical sciences with topics in the social sciences. Ayurveda has always been part of my family's daily life, as we believe natural medicines are just as important as synthetic ones. I was inspired to learn more about the traditional practices of Ayurveda and the history behind the medical practices. I started at Michigan Tech as a biomedical engineering student; however, I soon realized that the aspect I loved most about the major was the medical anthropology aspect. This paper, among other reasons, inspired my switch to anthropology. I am excited to continue to explore medical anthropology as well as the various other social sciences that Michigan Tech has to offer.

I've lost track of how many times I've visited the doctor with a seasonal cold only to receive another short-term prescription. The routine doctor's visit is efficient, but it also reveals something missing in my healthcare experience: little attention is given to preventing these recurring illnesses in the first place. This pattern raises a larger question about how our medical system approaches everyday health: How might traditional systems complement modern medicine by emphasizing balance and long-term health? Ayurveda, a traditional Indian medical system, focuses on just that—creating balance within an individual to prevent disease and combat illness through a wide variety of natural cures. In India and Nepal, Ayurveda is a recognized medical system with state-approved education and training. Incorporating it into Western medicine could help to generate new research that bridges the gap between natural principles and already emerging technologies. Recognizing the relationship between the two practices would help to create more individualized treatments. These ideas will help to inspire a holistic and natural perspective on wellness and medicine. Integrating Ayurvedic medicine into Western healthcare would expand treatment options, advance medical research, and promote a more holistic understanding of wellness through its unique, natural principles.

For over 5,000 years, Ayurveda has been recognized as an Indigenous traditional medical system within India; it's practiced like how standard medicine is used in the U.S. Balance is one of the key principles of Ayurvedic medicine, focusing on the interconnectedness of the mind, body, and spirit. It is based on the idea that the body has three life forces: the Doshas, which include Vata, which governs movement, the nervous system, and elimination; Pitta, which regulates metabolism, digestion, absorption, and body temperature; and Kapha, which provides structure, stability, and moisture to the body and mind (Jaiswal & Williams, 2016). The goal of Ayurvedic practice is to maintain or restore the natural balance of an individual's Doshas through personalized dietary adjustments, lifestyle modifications, herbal remedies, yoga, and meditation.

Ayurveda, through its natural preventative measures, promotes a more holistic understanding of everyday wellness. By prioritizing the well-being of the whole individual, it works as a tool to maintain balance that can be integrated easily into one's life. Through its focus on preventative techniques, Ayurveda can be split into a balance between daily practices, dinacharya, and seasonal routines, ritucharya (Rao et al., 2019). These practices enable a

more holistic understanding of wellness by providing ways to align the body, mind, and spirit with the natural rhythms of the world. When understanding these daily regimens, it can become easier to focus on preventing ailments through the use of natural remedies. Ayurveda also promotes a more holistic understanding of wellness by recognizing that not everyone needs to be treated in the same way.

Western medicine tends to step in after a problem shows up, which leaves a lot of Americans dealing with sudden, expensive healthcare bills; the integration of Ayurveda would help to alleviate some of the costs associated with proper healthcare. According to the Center for Medicaid and Medicare Services (CMS), prescription drug spending was nearly \$334 billion in 2019 and is projected to grow, with the country paying the highest prices among developed nations. These numbers are staggering, and many Americans lack access to proper healthcare. With a high focus on preventative care and the use of natural remedies, Ayurveda poses as a cheaper alternative to pharmaceuticals and modern healthcare; it would also potentially lower outpatient visit costs in public facilities. Many of the practices are inexpensive or do not require any additional funds. Using natural care within modern medicine would help to reduce costs due to the resources available; this idea is supported by Mishra et al. (2024), who note that, “Governments and health systems could consider integrating Ayurveda into the broader healthcare system, offering more affordable access to the masses through initiatives such as Central Sector Scheme for Promotion of Ayush Intervention in Public Health Initiatives (PHI) which aims to promote the integration of Ayurveda with public health initiatives such as National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) and National Urban Health Mission (NUHM).” These public health initiatives are integral for the incorporation of Ayurvedic medicine, and in return will lower medical costs for many Americans.

Reluctantly, many Americans are pushed into a dependency on pharmaceuticals, as the cycle between getting sick, going to the doctor’s, and being prescribed medicine continues. Healthcare has unfortunately turned into a large-scale business rather than a practice that focuses on equitable care for all. As discussed by Rang (2013), big pharmaceutical companies tend to mislead doctors, leading to the harm of patients. Pharmaceutical companies spend about twice as much on marketing than the research and development of new drugs, which leads to a significant ethical concern regarding patient safety. The limited treatment approaches within Western medicine are a cause for concern. The integration of Ayurvedic medicine would alleviate some of this concern by introducing new ways of treatment—not only would patients gain access to more holistic and preventive care, but healthcare systems would also benefit from a more comprehensive, collaborative approach to treatment.

Ayurveda is not just a policy-level solution; its strength comes from how naturally it fits into everyday routines. It offers practices that empower people to care for their well-being long before illness develops, grounding health in balance rather than reaction. Yoga, rooted in the same Vedic tradition, is the most intuitive place to begin. With a strong historical significance, yoga is often considered a “sister science” to Ayurveda. Both practices stemmed from the Vedas, ancient religious texts that have guided Hinduism for centuries. Much like Ayurveda, yoga focuses on creating balance and promotes well-being by improving mental and physical health. Yoga poses are a practice that guides the nervous system into stillness, and they help to lay the foundation for meaningful meditation. Depending on your focus, your practice can help to balance the three Doshas. To balance Pitta, one might focus on gentle movements that soothe the body. For strong Vata, one might focus on slow components of the practice while emphasizing breathwork. And last, to balance Kapha, create a practice with more vigor and energy (A. Vaidya & R. Vaidya, 2023). Yoga is a practice that you can tailor to fit your life and needs. You may find yourself spending ten minutes out of your day trying a guided YouTube video, or maybe you want to check out your local yoga studio—there is no wrong way to practice yoga.

The practices of Ayurveda are often simple and easy to incorporate into an average person's daily life. Choosing a simple practice to enhance your health will allow you to find a grounding balance every day. An example of this from my daily life is incorporating the practice of yoga. I have found that it also helps to reduce stress and anxiety in my daily life. Yoga calms the nervous system, lowers stress, and is shown to increase mood-boosting chemicals like GABA, dopamine, and serotonin (R et al., 2023). Choosing to incorporate yoga into my daily routine was something that I found to be easy to commit to because Michigan Technological University offers a physical education course focused on the practice. Yoga is considered an integral and essential part of Ayurveda because the two work harmoniously. Finding something suited to your life is important when practicing the incorporation of Ayurveda into your routine. This could include taking a daily supplement, practicing intentional movement, or simply getting adequate sleep every night, which will allow you to begin to find balance over time.

Much like yoga and meditation—simple daily practices—Ayurveda focuses on balance within one's life overall. As opposed to the demanding Western pharmaceutical industry that mass-produces singular drugs as a way of treatment, Ayurveda takes a different, more balanced approach. For example, instead of prescribing various anxiety medications as a generalized way of curing anxiety, it identifies where the imbalance comes from, whether it be Vata (nervous energy), Pitta (inflammation), or Kapha (lethargy)—the three Doshas. This point is supported by researchers, who argue that the three Doshas work in synchronicity and an imbalance in one can limit one's wellbeing (Travis et al., 2015). If one has an imbalance with Pitta, Ayurveda may suggest avoiding spicy or acidic foods and focusing on taking cooling foods like cucumbers and sweet fruits, whereas Western medicine would focus on taking anti-inflammatory medications. Additionally, there are ways to find balance through movement and breath, as supported by the practices of yoga and meditation—something that pharmaceuticals cannot replicate alone. Through this focus on natural remedies for a subject-based approach, Ayurveda supports a more holistic approach to health and well-being.

Due to the focus on approaching health through natural solutions, Ayurveda can expand treatment options beyond those of Western medicine. Instead of taking medications, going to extensive therapies, or receiving surgeries, Ayurveda focuses on preventing issues before they arise through its use of herbs, plants, oils, and movement. If a patient is experiencing chronic pain, in Western society, they may be sent to physical therapy, given pain medications, and might have to undergo surgery. Using Ayurveda, the patient will receive Abhyanga (therapeutic oil massage) along with meditations and pranayama (breathing exercises) to relieve both tension and anxiety surrounding their pain. The idea of using Abhyanga to treat chronic pain is supported by a study conducted by Basler (2011), which concluded that therapeutic oil massages help reduce stress within an individual's life. In return, these anti-stress effects can also have an impact on the whole body and will reduce pain within the body. Another way natural treatments are incorporated into Ayurveda is through dietary supplements. One such supplement is turmeric, which has been shown to have many beneficial healing effects on the body.

Through the use of dietary supplements, Ayurveda emphasizes the ability to expand treatment options rather than relying on nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, which are often used in Western medicine. Additionally, another alternative to pharmaceutical symptom management is Panchakarma, which includes oil treatments, herbal steam, and digestive resets, and is used for conditions like autoimmune disease, skin disorders, and chronic fatigue. According to Conboy et al., (2009), they expand upon the idea of Panchakarma to demonstrate how this treatment method can improve one's quality of life. Within their research, they write, "Panchakarma may be effective in assisting one's expected and reported adherence to new and healthier behavior patterns." This alludes to the idea that Ayurvedic ways of treatment can

benefit one's overall health and life. Overall, Ayurveda offers new ways of treatment in opposition to Western pharmaceuticals.

Due to the multitude of treatment options that Ayurveda offers through its natural principles, it can also be used to advance medical research. Various dietary supplements and methodologies found in Ayurveda demonstrate medical breakthroughs. To begin, Curcumin—the active ingredient in turmeric—is now widely studied for its anti-inflammatory, antioxidant, and anticancer properties. Clinical trials continue to explore its potential in treating arthritis, Alzheimer's, and even depression. Kunnumakkara et al. (2023) expand on the idea of the natural compound found in turmeric and other dietary supplements: "Natural compounds exhibit diverse biological activities and drug-like properties... They have a remarkable role in human health and disease prevention and act as a powerful means of promoting optimal health, longevity, and quality of life." Another dietary supplement that contains natural compounds linked to health benefits is Ashwagandha. Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*) is being researched for its adaptogenic effects—helping the body manage stress, improve energy, and balance hormones—influencing studies on stress biology and neuroendocrine function. Within their research, Mikulska et al. (2023) discuss the emergence of research surrounding Ashwagandha and its reported sleep benefits: "Current research covers many aspects of human health, including neuroprotective, sedative, and adaptogenic effects and effects on sleep." In contrast to Western medical research, Ayurveda utilizes its natural principles to expand the medical field through a different perspective.

With its growth potential and the emergence of public health initiatives, integrating Ayurvedic medicine with Western medicine will be beneficial for both practices. The Ayurveda market is predicted to grow significantly, with a forecast of increasing by \$11.3 billion between 2024 and 2029, driven by a growing interest in natural products and low-side-effect medicines (Team, T. M., 2025). The holistic healthcare approach of Ayurveda resonates with consumers seeking natural remedies for various health concerns, which makes the market a rising industry. The integration of Ayurvedic practices into modern healthcare systems is paving the way for a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to healthcare. Ayurvedic treatment plans and therapies, encompassing weight management and various health concerns, are being researched and developed, emphasizing safety and efficacy. Continuing to use Ayurvedic medicine, especially within Western societies, will continue to progress the market as well as the potential for treatment options.

Training for proper use of Ayurveda is already sprouting in the United States and surrounding countries. Located in Nevada City, California, the California College of Ayurveda offers comprehensive education surrounding Ayurveda. From introductory programs to advanced clinical training, the school offers paths that lead to certification as a Clinical Ayurvedic Specialist (CAS). This training, already offered in the United States, will help to emphasize the connection between traditional and modern medicine. Strengthening both practices, this type of training will allow for the spread of knowledge and, therefore, will lead to more regulation of Ayurveda—something that is necessary to ensure safe medical practices. Due to its emergence in the United States and in many South American countries, the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have taken an interest in adopting policies that incorporate traditional and complementary medicines, providing a supportive framework for Ayurveda's growth. With backing from the PAHO and the WHO, it may be possible to develop regulations and safe practices surrounding Ayurveda, which would offer ease of integration as medicine develops (Hoenders, R. et al. 2024).

It is important to consider the need for regulation, research-backed safety standards, and practitioner training, which would strengthen both Ayurvedic and Western medical systems. While India has government-recognized Ayurvedic universities and national licensing, the

United States lacks standardized oversight for Ayurvedic supplements, practices, and education. This gap has sometimes led to concerns about product purity, mislabeled herbal blends, or unregulated treatments. However, these issues highlight why integration—not separation—is necessary. By incorporating Ayurveda into Western healthcare systems, the U.S. could implement FDA-approved quality control measures, develop accredited training programs, and encourage collaborative care among physicians, researchers, and Ayurvedic practitioners (Kumar & Arya, 2024). Creating shared clinical guidelines would help legitimize Ayurvedic treatments while ensuring their safety and reliability. With regulation and scientific validation, Ayurveda's natural methods could be practiced more safely and effectively, expanding trustworthy healthcare options for millions of Americans.

Some may believe that Ayurveda is solely a lifestyle choice and cannot treat major diseases or illnesses. Due to the idea that Ayurveda is a preventative method of medicine, its treatment methods often go unnoticed or underappreciated. Many natural dietary supplements have been linked to medicinal properties. Ayurvedic herbs like Ashwagandha (Withanolides), Turmeric (Curcumin), and Tulsi (Holy Basil) have shown anti-cancer and immune-boosting properties in modern studies. Curcumin, in particular, has been found to slow the growth of cancer cells and reduce inflammation associated with tumor development. For type 2 diabetes, Ayurvedic herbs such as Gurmar (*Gymnema sylvestre*) and Bitter Melon (*Momordica charantia*) are used to naturally regulate blood sugar and improve insulin sensitivity, offering a more sustainable complement to medication (Zoi et al., 2021). Rather than being solely a lifestyle choice, Ayurvedic techniques can be integrated into Western medical practices to treat and cure diseases using natural measures.

Although Ayurveda may offer many natural healing properties, some argue that Western medicine is superior to Ayurvedic medicine because of the wide variety of pharmaceuticals that are available. Western medicine focuses on expanding the options for pharmaceuticals, as they are often quick to obtain and effective at curing illness. Western medicine has built a dependency on pharmaceuticals and has turned health into a large-scale business as medicinal profit margins skyrocket. According to Ledley et al (2020), “from 2000 to 2018, 35 large pharmaceutical companies reported cumulative revenue of \$11.5 trillion and gross profit of \$8.6 trillion,” making the pharmaceutical industry one of the leading national markets. In comparison, Ayurveda doesn't focus on turning a profit foremost and considers preventative medicine to be superior to fast-acting pharmaceutical drugs. Pharmaceuticals often treat diseases after they appear, but Ayurveda emphasizes preventing disease by maintaining balance in diet, lifestyle, and mental health. Additionally, Ayurvedic medicine focuses on the treatment of the whole individual rather than treating issues in isolation, like pharmaceuticals tend to do. While Western medicine and ideals can be beneficial in many instances, incorporating Ayurveda to prevent diseases and illnesses before they arise can be of benefit. If you prevent diseases, then you will not have to rely on costly medicine and cures that fuel the pharmaceutical industry.

Overall, blending Ayurvedic practices with Western healthcare would create a more complete view of health, introduce new natural forms of treatment, and drive medical innovation by drawing on Ayurveda's distinctive, nature-based approach to healing. Since I began to practice natural forms of medicine, I have noticed that I have been so much more invested in my self-care on a day-to-day basis and have loved having a cleaner and holistic way of health within my life. In the U.S., it can be easy to build a reliance on pharmaceuticals; however, Ayurvedic medicine can help to stray away from dependency on pharmaceuticals and focus on preventative techniques. On the other hand, if it is not incorporated into Western medicine, individuals might struggle to afford the cost of their medications and continue to use pharmaceuticals in a way that solely treats illness and doesn't work to prevent ailments. In short, it is important to incorporate a balance of natural Ayurvedic health practices with those of Western healthcare to create a more holistic idea of health.

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