

AYURVEDA

In *Sanskrit* , means "knowledge of life". Herbs lie at the very heart of Ayurvedic practice. Ayurvedic knowledge was born from the wisdom of the ancient *rishis* (sages and healers) and *yogis* (ascetics practicing yoga) of India, and was first passed on from healer to healer as an oral tradition for untold generations before the earliest known texts were written around 5000 BC. The *Rigveda* is the first documented scientific record of Ayurveda (Griffith, 1963). *Rig* means "in verses" and *veda* means "book of infinite knowledge". The *Rigveda* emphasizes the great importance of herbs for optimal health and well-being. The main verse (*sloka*) of this book states:

"The sun should be a giver of happiness, the sky should be a giver of happiness, all trees and plants should be givers of happiness. All these should give us peace of mind (*shanti*) and even the peace should give us peace".

The Ayurvedic approach is highly respectful towards all creation and sees the whole universe as one divine unity. Hinduism is generally viewed in the West as the main religion of India. However, it is not a religion in the ordinary sense; it is rather known as *dharma* , which in Sanskrit means "way of life". Hinduism is a way of being which respects the delicate balance between all forces of nature, especially the coexistence of humans and nature, and Ayurveda is the practical expression of this dharma. Ayurveda has evolved since its early beginnings into one of the most comprehensive and respected holistic approaches to health and well-being.

The knowledge of **Ayurveda**, first written down in the ancient Vedas, was further described 2000 years later (2700 to 600 BC) in the Ayurvedic *samhitas* (textbooks). Especially important are those by Carak (*Carak Samhita* , 1949) and Susrut (*Susrut Samhita* , 1938) who documented the medical knowledge of their time with the help of their disciples. The *Carak Samhita* is primarily a book on medical therapeutics, describing herbal health tonics and rejuvenators for longevity and prevention of disease, as well as daily regimens for better living, including diet which varies for different body types and different diseases. The text integrates the art and science of living. It is impressive to see how much knowledge currently taught in modern sciences, such as botany, pharmacology, anatomy and physiology (including the circulation of blood and lymph), is described in detail in the *Carak Samhita* .

In reading these ancient scriptures, we become aware of the utmost importance of herbal medicine for maintaining well-being, preventing disease, restoring health and prolonging life. In such scriptures as *Vagbhata* (Godbole *et al.*, 1966), *Nighantu Adarsha* (Vaidya, 1985), *Agnipurana* (Vedavyasa, 1966), *Vishnupurana* (Garg, 1982), *Padmapurana* (Vedvyasa, 1960), *Garudapurana* (Vedavyasa, 1964; Shastri, 1968) and *Tulsi Kavacham* (Dymock *et al.* , 1893), written between 500 BC and 1200 AD, the plant Tulsi is continuously mentioned as one of the main pillars of herbal medicine. Early references describing Ayurvedic, Unani and folklore uses of Tulsi are noted by Dymock *et al.*, (1893); Nadkarni, (1908-revised, 1982); Kirtikar and Basu, (1935); Varier, (1996); Sharma, (1999) and Chopra *et al.*, (1996).