

Vyādhi (Disease): Inputs from the Yoga-Sūtras and Its Commentaries on a Predominantly Āyurvedic Terminology

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Introduction

Yoga and Ayurveda have been considered as allied and complimentary disciplines.¹ The highest states of yoga have been discussed in early ayurvedic texts. Caraka extols yoga as that which leads to liberation (*yogo mokṣappravartakaḥ*).² The *Yoga-Sūtras* mentions *auśadhi* (medicinal herbs) as a means to attain yogic powers (*siddhi*).³ These are a few indicators of the connections between yoga and Ayurveda.

Ayurveda is clearly a medical discipline. Hence the definition and discussion of disease, its causes, treatment, and other such concepts will naturally form part of this discipline. Yoga, today, is also practiced as an alternative therapy of healing along with Ayurveda. But, yoga is unlike Ayurveda. Yoga was originally a system of philosophy. This becomes evident from the study of the *Yoga-Sūtras*, the first available systematic work on yoga. The therapeutic dimension of yoga seems to be a later development. But interestingly, the term *vyādhi* (disease) finds a mention in the *Yoga-Sūtras* in the very first chapter (30th verse (*sūtra*)). It is therefore worthwhile to study the views on disease, diagnosis, treatment, and disease preventive measures in this work of philosophy when therapeutic yoga was yet to emerge. Furthermore, it is also worthwhile to explore the influence of Ayurvedic thoughts in this early work of yoga philosophy related to *vyādhi* and other associated aspects.

Disease

CONTEXT OF DISEASE

The extent of relevant ideas on *vyādhi* spans five sūtras of the first chapter (*pāda*) of the *Yoga-Sūtras* (YS 1.28-32). Sūtras 28 and 29 mention that *japa* (repetition) of *praṇava* (*oin* – the primordial sound)

and meditating upon its meaning lead to self-realization and the disappearance of obstacles. Nine *antarāyas* (obstacles to yoga) which could also be considered as mental distractions are listed in sūtra 30. *Vyādhi* is en-listed as the first member in this list. Sūtra 31 presents four *sahabhūis* (coexisting afflictions) of these nine distractions. Finally, sūtra 32 prescribes *ekatattvābhīyāsa* (focusing the mind on a single entity) to overcome obstacles and afflictions.

INDICATIONS FROM ETYMOLOGY

There are many words like *vyādhi*, *roga*, *āmaṃya*, and *upatāpa* in Sanskrit to denote disease. To the exception of the term *vyādhi*, all other terms uniformly denote the physical injury caused by disease (the etymology of these words would be disease is that which causes physical harm/injury). Patañjali prefers to use the term *vyādhi* to denote disease. The etymology of this term is *vividhā ādhayo 'smāt*⁴ (that from which various mental afflictions arise is disease). The choice of this word and also the context of its utilization (presented above) imply that Patañjali is concerned about psychological consequences of the ailments more than any other aspect of disease.

VYĀSA'S COMMENTARY AND SUB-COMMENTARIES

Many commentaries have been written in Sanskrit, across centuries, on the *Yoga-Sūtras*. The earliest commentary ascribed to Vyāsa is considered to be as old as the sūtras.⁵ Some scholars even consider the commentary of Vyāsa as an auto-commentary to



the *Yoga-Sūtras* by Patañjali.⁶ Many sub-commentaries have appeared to elucidate the views expressed in Vyāsa's commentary. Also existing are many Sanskrit commentaries that directly comment upon the *Yoga-Sūtras*. Though these commentaries follow the well-structured grammatical framework of Sanskrit language, still, being products of different times and different minds, numerous interpretations exist. Hence, in pursuit of insights from these various views, definitions, and discussions on vyādhi in these commentaries are analyzed in this article.

There are four major sub-commentaries to Vyāsa's commentary on the *Yoga-Sūtras*. In the order of chronology they are *Tattva-Vaiśārādī* (by Vācaspati Mīśra), *Vivaraṇa* (by Śaṅkara), *Yoga-Vārttika* (by Vijñānabhikṣu), and *Bhāsvatī* (by Hariharanandāraṇya).

Vyāsa on Vyādhi

The principal commentator, Vyāsa defines⁷ vyādhi as "disease is the disorder/imbalance (*vaiśamyaṃ*) in the humors (*dhātu*), fluids/secretions (*rasa*) and the sense-organs (*karaṇa*) of the body (*dhātu-rasa-karaṇa-vaiśamyaṃ*)."

The juxtaposition of this definition of vyādhi with the definitions of Caraka and Suśruta on vyādhi will bring out the significance of the definition of Vyāsa.

Caraka states⁸ "Imbalance in the dhātus leads to *vikāra* (disease) (*vikāro dhātu-vaiśamyaṃ*)."

Though initially Suśruta defines⁹ it as — "All the conjunctions of pain to that/him (*puruṣa*, who is made up of five elements) are called vyādhis (*tad duḥkhasanniyoga vyādhāya ucyante*)," later he clarifies that "vyādhi signifies all distempers incidental to the several or combined actions of the three deranged bodily humors and blood (*vyādhigrahaṇāt vātapitta-kaphaśoṇita sannipātavaiśamyanimittā sarva eva vyādhayo vyākhyātāḥ*)."

Both the ayurvedic definitions consider vyādhi as imbalance of humors only. (Suśruta includes derangement of blood also.) Whereas, as evident, Vyāsa along with humors, mentions the disorder of the *rasa* (fluid secretions) and also of the sense-organs (*karaṇas*).

The definition of disease by Vyāsa indicates the acceptance of the pattern set by earlier Ayurvedic texts (acceptance of *dhātuvaiśamya*). But the inclusion

of *rasa* and *karaṇa* under the scope of diseases is unique. Another interesting aspect about the first reading of the definition of disease by Vyāsa is that there is no clear precedents for such a definition. Similarly no later commentary, except the sub-commentaries and a couple of independent commentaries, accept or repeat the definition of disease provided by Vyāsa.

The Sub-Commentaries to Vyāsa's Commentary

As mentioned above, there exist four sub-commentaries on Vyāsa's commentary, among which the sub-commentary of Śaṅkara is more informative and elaborates the discussion on vyādhi. Let us consider word by word, the analysis of Vyāsa's definition of disease by the authors of these sub-commentaries.

Dhātu: All of the four sub-commentators state that *vāta*, *pitta*, and *kapha* are the three dhātus.

Vācaspati Mīśra and Vijñānabhikṣu trace the etymology of the term *dhātu* as that which holds/nourishes the body¹⁰ (*śarīra-dhāraakatvāt/śarīra-dhāraṇāt*).

It has to be noted that words like *dhātu* and *doṣas* have been used in ayurvedic texts to indicate the three humors. The word *dhātu* in ayurvedic texts is also used to indicate a set of seven bodily constituents. It is interesting to note that in the context of defining disease, the constituents of *dhātu* used by Vyāsa has been uniformly interpreted by the authors of the sub-commentaries as three humors. Whereas, elsewhere in the *Yoga-Sūtras*, Vyāsa¹¹ himself uses the term *dhātu* to indicate a set of seven bodily elements. In the same context, Vyāsa uses the term *doṣas* to indicate the three humors. This also indicates the prevalence of interaction between yoga and Ayurveda at a very initial stage.

Rasa: In the view of the three sub-commentaries other than that of Śaṅkara, *rasa* is the transformation of the food/liquid that is consumed, into bodily fluid. Nothing more is expressed in this regard in the three sub-commentaries. But Śaṅkara¹² is the only author who makes a significant contribution here. He lists out the seven rasas namely "serum (*rasa*), blood (*lohita*), fat (*medas*), flesh (*manīsa*), bone (*asthi*), bone marrow (*majjā*), and reproductive tissues (*śukra*), and explains why these are called *rasa* (*rasa*

upayuktāhārasya-pariṇāmanaviśeṣaḥ sa ca saptadhā rasalohita-medomānīsaasthimajjāśuklākhyāḥ tasyavaiṣamyani-vṛddhikṣayau)." Rasa, in his view, is food and hence the constituents of the body that emerge due to the digestion of rasa (food) is also rasa. But Śaṅkara himself includes rasa (to indicate serum) as the first of elements in the list of seven rasas. Thus we find the usage of the word rasa in two different meanings in the same portion of the text.

Karaṇa: Karaṇa is the third word in the definition of Vyāsa. According to Vijñānabhikṣu¹³ "the mind is also to be denoted by the term karaṇa apart from the generally accepted meaning (sense-organs) (*karaṇānāni cakṣurādi manādīnām*)."¹³ This suggestion of Vijñānabhikṣu is worth noting because vyādhi in the context of yoga is that from which various afflictions arise. Apart from the physical ailments that create mental afflictions, Vijñānabhikṣu, by implication, is in favor of inclusion of mental ailments (psychological/psychiatric problems) which cause agony/suffering under vyādhi.

Vaiṣamyam: The views of sub-commentaries on the term vaiṣamyam is as follows. Vācaspati Mīśra, Vijñānabhikṣu, and Hariharānandāraṇya explain¹⁴ it as the nature of being in higher or lower levels (*nyūnādhikabhāvaḥ*), dissimilarity (in the proportion of humors) (*visadṛṣabhāvaḥ*), and deformity (*vairūpya*) respectively. Śaṅkara¹⁵ uses the term increase and decrease (*vṛddhikṣayau*). Thus we see that each of the sub-commentaries uses a different term to explain the term vaiṣamyam used by Vyāsa.

The reason for the divergence among commentators may be due to the following factors. Disease according to the definition is vaiṣamyam of dhātu, rasa, and karaṇa. If vaiṣamyam is translated as imbalance (*visadṛṣabhāva*), it would be difficult to explain as to what imbalance of karaṇas (senses) may mean. Further, if vaiṣamyam is taken to mean vairūpya it may not be possible to explain the deformity of humors. Such is the challenge in interpreting the term. Hence, the various renditions.

In the commentary of Śaṅkara,¹⁶ we find a little more description on how vaiṣamyam happens. In Śaṅkara's view, *dhātu vaiṣamyam* occurs owing to the consumption of food that may induce imbalance in any specific humor in the body. Śaṅkara further

opines that an imbalance in the dhātus may happen on its own or due to some external factors. It is to be noted that Śaṅkara does not touch upon the causes of vaiṣamyam in rasa and karaṇa.

Thus, from the definition of disease found in the commentary of Vyāsa and its sub-commentaries, the influence of ayurvedic texts is palpable. But at the same time, inclusion of rasa-karaṇa-vaiṣamyam in the definition of disease is not to be found in the works of Caraka and Suśruta. Due to contextual appropriateness, Vyāsa might have included rasa and karaṇa vaiṣamyam (since imbalance of rasa and deformity of senses also cause mental afflictions).

Independent Commentaries

Bhoja and other independent commentators, whose period ranges, from the tenth century CE, present their observations on the term vyādhi in a very brief way. The views of the independent commentators can be classified into two groups:

1. Those that follow Vyāsa's commentary in totality
2. Those that vary from Vyāsa's commentary.

The second set of commentators omit imbalance of rasa and deformation of karaṇa.¹⁷ By omission of rasa and karaṇa, they seem to follow the ayurvedic definition of disease rather than subscribing to the views of Vyāsa. Further, in their view, *jvara* (fever) and other such conditions which arise due to an imbalance of the humors are vyādhis. Therefore these independent commentators of *Yoga-Sūtras* explicitly present the popularly understood meaning of disease.

Thus we see that there are two schools of thought in defining vyādhi among the commentators of *Yoga-Sūtras*. One group is influenced by prevalent ayurvedic definitions, the other (which includes rasa and karaṇa) follow Vyāsa's definition which might be based on, to borrow the words of Philipp A. Maas,¹⁸ "some medical system that shared its basic theoretical assumptions with classical Ayurveda."

Technique of Diagnosis

There are no direct references on diagnosis of disease in the *Yoga-Sūtras*. But there are certain indications that merit mention.

The commentary of Vyāsa and others to the *Yoga-*

*Sūtras nābhicakre kāyavyūhājñānam*¹⁹ provides a hint in this regard. The meaning of the sūtra is — *saṁnyama* (practice of *dhāraṇā*, *dhyāna*, and *saṁādhi*) on the navel leads to the knowledge of arrangement of the body. Commenting upon this verse Vyāsa says²⁰ that the status of three doṣas, and the seven dhātus are known by this saṁnyama. Hence one should do saṁnyama on the navel region which would lead to the knowledge of the whole body, including the status of the rasas, mala, dhātu, nāḍī, and the *jīva* and even its movement.

From all the descriptions above, it is amply evident that this saṁnyama helps to understand the entire structure of the body and all of its constituents. So it is an effective tool for self diagnosis. But there are no indications regarding using this saṁnyama by a *yogī* to understand the bodily structure of others to help diagnose their disease.

This may be considered the yogic way of understanding the entire structure of the body and finding the disease in it. Although no commentary/sub-commentary mentions about disease in this context, still, when all the constituents of the body are realized, disease in them should also be understood through this.

Cure of Disease

One finds the mention of *ekatattvābhyāsa*²⁰ in the *Yoga-Sūtras* as the method that is prescribed to overcome the nine obstacles for yoga of which *vyādhi* is the first. In brief, this is a practice of fixing the mind on *Īśvara* or any other object upon which the mind of a person can attain focus easily.

If one scrutinizes the effectiveness of *ekatattvābhyāsa* in treating *vyādhi*, it will be evident that suffering created by *vyādhi* and the lack of focus of the mind is overcome with the help of *ekatattvābhyāsa*.

Most commentaries, including that of Vyāsa, are silent on the mechanism of operation of *ekatattvābhyāsa* in overcoming *vyādhi* and other distractions. *Sadāśivendra Sarasvatī*, who discusses the mechanism of operation, states²¹ that *vyādhi* and other *citta vikṣepas* are *vāsanās* (latent impressions of actions performed in the past). By practicing *ekatattvābhyāsa* for a long time at regular periods

with faith, one attains success.

One does not find any further discussion on treating disease in the *Yoga-Sūtras*. Looking at the view of *Sadāśivendra Sarasvatī* and also the original *Yoga-Sūtras* context, two yogic ideas emerge with relation to the treatment of disease from *Yoga-Sūtra* lore. Of these two, the first attacks the root cause of disease, and the second takes care of the symptoms. The two ideas are as follows:

1. The very cause of disease is *vāsanās* (by implication the *karmas* of the past). Hence, by undertaking yogic practices to neutralize the effects of karma one can overcome diseases once and for all.
2. Looking at the term *vyādhi* (that which causes mental affliction), training the mind to attain focus by practices like *ekatattvābhyāsa* one can overcome the suffering generated by disease although bodily pain may persist.

Conclusion

The literary evidence presented above reveals the fact that *vyādhi* was considered an obstacle to mental focus, a distraction. Hence, only the mental distraction arising out of diseases was dealt with in the *Yoga-Sūtras*. In healing, as one has to tackle *roga* (physical injury/pain), one should also focus on the *vyādhi* (agony and mental afflictions) aspect of disease. If Ayurveda can tackle the *roga* aspect of disease then yogic practices can be effective in mitigating *vyādhi*. This two-pronged approach to disease (*roga/vyādhi*) will help a healer/physician to help the patient free from the physical pain and mental suffering caused by disease. As the disease is psychosomatic, the approach should also be psychosomatic. In this era of painkillers, yoga can be utilized effectively as a suffering-killer. When painkillers are foreign bodies (chemicals) and play a role just to temporarily suppress pain, yoga, if mastered, can ensure lasting cure of sufferings of all kinds.

Nābhicakra-saṁnyama is another important take away in this analysis. From the point of view of all human beings, irrespective of the healer or the healed, *saṁnyama* on *nābhicakra* is a very effective yogic tool to understand one's own structure. But it is to be

admitted that it is a yogic power that is attained through sustained practice of great intensity and there are no shortcuts. There is already a great awareness worldwide about the health benefits of yogic practice. Those who desire this tool for health have to intensify their efforts and thus they will have to move from the periphery of yoga towards its nucleus.

Finally, in the discussion on the treatment of vyādhi, we find that yoga approaches a cure at the causal level (by getting rid of vāsanās) and also at the level of symptoms (by overcoming the suffering) created by disease.

Thus, beyond the haṭhayogic texts that contain therapeutic ideas, the primary philosophical text of yoga (*Yoga-Sūtras*) and its commentaries across centuries prove to be a fountainhead of information on healing that are yet to be explored and utilized effectively in current day therapeutic practices.

References

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