

## The Use of Vyāyāma or Physical Exercise, Prescribed in Ayurveda

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**Abstract:** Ayurveda also gives an importance to the physical exercise for the maintenance of good health. According to Ayurveda the consequences resulting from physical exercise are not only lightness of the body capacity for work, collectedness, power of enduring hardship; but also it removes of all imperfections and augmentation of the digestive fire. Therefore, vyāyāma has both the values: preventive and curative.

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### Introduction

Vyāyāma or Physical Exercise is essential for a person to maintain his normal health. It also helps to carry out daily tasks with energy and attentiveness, without undue tiredness, and with ample vigor. Vyāyāma (Vi + Ā + Yam + Ghañ)<sup>8</sup> is the term, especially used in Ayurveda for the physical activities, which can be identified with the 'physical exercise' in the present time. Ayurveda, the medical system of India, has also prescribed vyāyāma in connection with both measures: preventive and curative. The use of vyāyāma is, therefore, has been discussed in this paper from the point of view of Ayurveda only.

Sources for the discussion made here, are mainly the *Vṛddhatrayī*, namely the *Carakasamhitā* (CS)<sup>2</sup>, the *Suśrutasamhitā* (SS)<sup>3</sup> and the *Aṣṭāṅghṛdayasamhitā* (AH)<sup>9</sup> and from among the Sri Lankan medical texts, the *Sārārthasaṅgrahaya* (Sārā)<sup>7</sup>, written in Sanskrit in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century A.C.; the *Bhesajjamañjūsa* (BM)<sup>6</sup> written in Pali, the *Yogāṃavaya*(Yogā)<sup>5</sup> and the *Prayogaratnāvaliya* (Prayo)<sup>4</sup>, written in Sinhala in the 13<sup>th</sup> century A.C.. Therefore, these four are the oldest treatises on medicine so far found in Sri Lanka. The phrase 'Sri Lankan Medical Texts' is used here to distinguish them from the Indian Ayurvedic texts only. Otherwise, Sri Lankan medical system is nothing but Ayurveda though it has some distinctive features.

The history of vyāyāma can be traced from a remote past, even from the primitive societies. We have, at least, more than three thousand years old written evidence for the use of vyāyāma and as the *Carakasamhitā* and the *Suśrutasamhitā* took their present form exactly before the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.C., we have nearly two thousand years history of medical perspective of vyāyāma. Nevertheless, there is no scope to discuss the long history of vyāyāma in this paper.

The definition of vyāyāma has been given in the *Carakasamhitā*, thus:

"śarīra ceṣṭā yā ceṣṭā  
sthairyāthā balavardhinī,  
dehavyāyāmasaṅkhyātā  
mātrayā tām samācaret." (CS.1.7.31)

(That exertion of body which is productive of good consequences to the body itself, which conduces to concentration of mind and increases strength is called physical exercise. One should have recourse to it in due measure). This verse is the aphorism of vyāyāma given in the *Carakasamhitā*, and according to this definition, vyāyāma promotes the perfect health which includes both the body and mind.

### Importance of vyāyāma

In the aphorism "*mithyāhāravihārābhyām*",<sup>2</sup> *āhāra* comes first and vyāyāma comes under *Vihāra* to emphasize the importance of physical

exercise. Ayurveda as the science of life, which is based on the principles of nature, focuses on the balance of the physiological functions to maintain perfect health. The *doṣas* (*vāta*, *pitta* and *kapha*) represents the variations, improper interaction of sense and sense objects; unwholesome acts performed by body and mind are all responsible for the disturbance of *doṣas*. *Āhāra* (diet) and *vihāra* (physical exercise) play a crucial role towards maintaining the body in a state of perfect health. Moreover, the person indulges in the physical exercises should consider the seasons (*ṛtus*) also - CS.1.6.3<sup>2</sup> or it should not be continued in the same way throughout the year as the natural changes overpower the health. Physical exercise done in the proper time, considering the season improves not only strength and complexion but also happiness and span of life - CS.1.6.3<sup>2</sup>. Ayurveda, therefore, advises the avoidance of *vyāyāma* in two seasons: *grīṣma* (summer) - CS.1.6.29<sup>2</sup>; AH.1.3.27<sup>9</sup> and *varṣā* (monsoon) - CS.1.6.29<sup>2</sup>; AH.1.3.27<sup>9</sup>. Ayurveda advises the physician to examine the 'vyāyāmaśakti' or capacity for physical exercise while examining a patient. It should be ascertained from the capacity for action.

"vyāyāmaśaktiśceti; vyāyāmaśaktirapi karmasaktyā parīkṣyā." - CS.3.8.121<sup>2</sup>

The judgment on three kinds of strength viz. superior, middling and inferior, is done in the same way - AH.1.1.12ff<sup>9</sup>.

### vyāyāma as a Therapy

*vyāyāma*, in Ayurveda, is used even as a therapy; in both aspects, preventive and curative. The foundation of Ayurvedic treatment lies on *vāyu*, *pitta* and *kapha*. These are the three 'Bio-regulating principles' present inside the body and are known as *tridoṣa*, which controls the various physiological functions of the body;

"sarveṣāmeva rogānāṃnidānaṃkupitā malāḥ" - AH.1.1.12ff<sup>9</sup>; SS.1.21<sup>3</sup>

(for all the diseases, the causes are the aggravated *doṣas*). In all the living things, animals or plants, the three Bio-regulating principles, *vāyu*, *pitta* and *kapha*, are responsible for all physiological functions taking place in a cell or a body. *Vāyu*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* are found in each and every cell which regulates and conducts the process in the body. These Bio-regulating principles or *doṣas*, when got disturbed, manifest some abnormal symptoms due to their malfunctioning within the body. According to the classical texts of Ayurveda eighty diseases or symptomatic disorders are caused by an unbalanced state of *vāta* (*asītirvātavikārāḥ*) - CS.1.20.10<sup>2</sup>. While diseases caused by *pitta* are of forty types (*catvāriṃsatpittavikārāḥ* - CS.1.20.10<sup>2</sup>), disorders caused mainly by *kapha* as mentioned in the classical texts are twenty in number (*viṃsatihśleṣmavikārāḥ* - CS.1.20.10<sup>2</sup>).

*Vyāyāma* is also one of the treatments which have been prescribed in Ayurveda for the twenty types of diseases and disorders caused by phlegm (*śleṣma*) - CS.1.20.19<sup>2</sup>; AH.1.3.19<sup>9</sup>; Sārā.1.115<sup>7</sup>. Again, the *Carakasamhitā*, in the section of *Vimāna*, has recommended the physical exercise as a treatment for phlegm. There, it prescribes running (*dhāvana*), jumping (*laṅghana*), leaping (*plāvana*) walking about (*parisaraṇa*), night-keeping (*jāgarana*), pugilistic combat (boxing- *niyuddha*) and athletic exercise etc. for the disturbed phlegm - CS.2.6.18<sup>2</sup>; AH.1.3.10<sup>9</sup>. The way *vyāyāma* works against the phlegm can be understood in the following description too given by Caraka:

"evamāsayamanupraviṣyorogataṃ kevalaṃ vaikārikam śleṣmamūla mūrdhvamutkṣipati, tatrāvajite śleṣmaṇyapi sarīrāntargatāḥ śleṣmavikārāḥ prasāntimāpadyante, yathā bhinne kedāraṣetau sāliyavaṣaṣṭikādī nyanabhiṣyandyamānānyambhasā raṣoṣamā padyante tadvaditi" - CS.1.20.19<sup>2</sup>.

(As paddy, barley and other crops are dried up when water collected in the field escapes upon through the ridges enclosing it being broken; even

so diseases caused by the phlegm are destroyed upon the root of the phlegm being thus destroyed.)

As already mentioned above, the reasons for the advice given in Ayurveda for indulgence in physical exercise during four seasons namely Śarat (autumn) Śísira (winter) Hemanta (early winter) Vasanta (spring) are clear. According to the law of nature, water becomes cold, clear and heavy and the Sun's rays are mild during Hemanta. The water and vegetables part taken of in Hemanta season give rise to an accumulation of kapha in the body on account of their heaviness and cold nature - BM.1.54<sup>6</sup>. This accumulated kapha finds expression in spring season and so brings about kapha type of disease - SS. 1.6.11<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, in this aspect vyāyāma acts as a preventive measure.

Moreover, the Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasamhitā has prescribed the "anekarūpavyāyāma-exercises of different kinds" - AH.1.3.11<sup>9</sup>, as a therapy for the diseases of kapha. Even the Bhesajamañjū-sā has mentioned the vyāyāma as a therapy for the same diseases - BM.1.108<sup>6</sup> vyāyāma is one of the treatments mentioned for the suppression of vomiting - BM.4.14<sup>6</sup>; AH.1.4.18<sup>9</sup>.

According to another explanation given in the Aṣṭāṅgahṛdayasamhitā, the therapy is of two kinds; i.e. brāhṇa (stoutening) and laṅghana (thinning, slimming) santarpaṇa and apatarpaṇa are also used as their synonyms respectively. Brāhṇa nourishes the body while laṅghana makes the body light - AH.1.14.1,2<sup>9</sup>. Laṅghana is of two kinds: śodhana and śamana. Vāgbhaṭa includes the vyāyāma among the seven kinds of śamana - AH.1.14.6,7<sup>9</sup>. According to Caraka too the vyāyāma is listed under laṅghana.

"catuṣprakārā sarṁsuddhih,  
pipāsā māruṭātapau,  
pācanānyupavāsaśca  
vyāyāmaśceti laṅghanam."  
- CS.1.22.18<sup>2</sup>

It also shows the importance of the vyāyāma as a therapy in both measures: preventive and curative.

Besides, sveda or Sudation without the agency of fire is suitable for diseases of vāta inactivated by medas and kapha. Vyāyāma is also one of the methods used in this connection - BM.1.77<sup>6</sup>; AH.1.17.28<sup>9</sup>. Further, both traditions, Ayurveda and Sri Lankan, have prescribed the vyāyāma for diseases arising from the decrease of sveda (sweat) - BM.1.79<sup>6</sup>; AH.1.11.33<sup>9</sup>. Caraka prescribes various exercises.

"vyāyāmayogair vividhaiḥ pragaḍhaiḥ"

- CS.3.6.50<sup>2</sup>

#### What does vyāyāma do?

One may ask the question: "If the vyāyāma causes the increase in both the vāta and pitta while decreasing the śleṣma, then, how vyāyāma makes the balance of doṣas or Bio-regulating principles?" In fact, what vyāyāma does is the increasing of the digestive fire (pācakāgni). When the digestive fire is in its good conditions, all types of foods become easily digested. Then, there is no doubt in the increase of vāta or pitta. On the other hand, according to Suśruta, pitta is also identical with the elemental fire. He says; "pitta is the same as fire, since such symptoms, as a burning sensation, digestion and all other characteristics of fire can never exhibit themselves in the human body without the intervention of pitta. pitta, therefore, is called internal fire" - CS.6.6.49<sup>2</sup>. And vyāyāma contributes for the digestion of food - BM. 6.33<sup>6</sup>. Even Vāgbhaṭa has mentioned about the excess of physical exercises too - AH.1.1.15<sup>9</sup> as causes for the aggravation of pitta,

The ativyāyāma or excess of physical exercise causes diseases based on both, vāta - AH.3.1.15<sup>9</sup> and pitta, whereas the proper physical exercise causes good health. Further the excess correlation of vyāyāma may cause

"*śramaḥ klamaḥ kṣayastrṣṇā  
raktapitta pratāmakaḥ,  
ativyāyāmataḥkāso  
jvaraśardiśca jāyate.*" - CS.1.7.33<sup>2</sup>;  
BM.20.1<sup>6</sup>; Sārā.10.1<sup>7</sup>; Yogā.p. 101<sup>5</sup>; Prayo.p.141<sup>4</sup>

And it causes the *kāṣya* or loss of flesh - SS. 1.15.39<sup>3</sup>. According to the Ayurvedic texts, the *kārṣya* or thinness is better than *sthaulya* (fattiness).

"*atyantagarhitāvetau sadā  
sthūlakṛṣṇau narau,  
śreṣṭho madhyaśarīrastu  
kṛśaḥ sthūlāttu pūjitaḥ*" - SS. 1.15.39<sup>3</sup>

Even *Vāgbhaṭa* says that the emaciation (*kārṣya*) is better than corpulence (*sthaulya*) because there is no treatment for the obese, for, neither *br̥mhaṇa* nor *laṅghana* is capable of vanquish excess of fat, digestive activity and *vāta*.

"*kārṣyameva vararisthaulyāt na  
hishūlasya bheṣajam,  
br̥mhaṇamlaṅghanam  
vālamatimedognivātajit.*"  
- AH.1.14.31<sup>9</sup>; Sārā.1.139-141<sup>7</sup>

### Limitations

The person who is thin (*kṛśa*) should not practise the *vyāyāma* - SS. 1.15.39<sup>3</sup>. If he does, it is called injudicious correlation of *vyāyāma* (*mithyāyoga*) and it causes diseases. Further, the *Bhesajjamañjūsā* and the *Aṣṭāṅghṛdayasamhitā* mentions that "persons suffering from diseases of *vāta* and *pitta*; children, the aged and those having indigestion should avoid *vyāyāma*. According to the *Yogārṇavaya*, patients who are suffering from *upadamśa* (venereal diseases) too should avoid *vyāyāma* - Yogā.p.171<sup>5</sup>.

"*vātapittāmayī bālo vuddho sāmo ca tam caje,  
ativyāyāmato kāso jaro caddhi ca jāyati,  
raktapittam padamako khayō taṅhā ca  
vaḍḍhati.*" - BM.3.10<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, even though the *vyāyāma* is essential for the good health, there should be certain limitations. Because the person, who indulges in physical exercises, laughter, talking, walking, sexual congress and night-keeping excessively, though these are necessary, over - indulgence in them one soon meets with destruction like an elephant that assails a lion - CS.1.7.35<sup>2</sup>. Even according to *Suśrutasamhitā*, physical exercise etc. though recommended should not be inordinately indulged in - SS.4.24.16<sup>3</sup>. The limitation of physical exercise depends upon the tiredness. Therefore, Caraka says;

"*prāk śramād vyāyāmavarjī syāt*" - CS.1.8.18<sup>2</sup>.

*Vyāyāma* should be stopped before one becomes tired. Otherwise, according to the *Aṣṭāṅghṛdayasamhitā*, *vyāyāma* should be done by a person using only a half of his strength.

"Persons who are strong and who indulge in fatty foods, in cold seasons and spring seasons, should do *vyāyāma* consuming half of their strength only while others and in other seasons should do it mildly"- AH.1.2.11,12<sup>9</sup>. The *Bhesajjamañjūsā* differs to some extent in this regard, from the *Aṣṭāṅghṛdayasamhitā*:

"*sītakāle vasante ca so sebbo adḍhasattiyā  
aññakāle yathāsatti ācare mandameva vā*" - BM.3.9<sup>6</sup>

It is to be done saving half of strength in cold season and in spring. In the other seasons one should follow it according to one's strength.

Not only *ativyāyāma* or excess of correlation of physical exercise, but also rest correlations: absence of correlation and injudicious correlation of *ativyāyāma* are causes of diseases - CS.11.39-41<sup>2</sup>.

Absence correlation of *vyāyāma* is also included among the causes for twenty types of disease based on *kapha*; such as:

1. *tr̥pti* - Sense of fullness in the stomach without having eaten anything.
2. *tandrā* - Drowsiness
3. *nidrādhikya* - Excessive sleep
4. *staimitya* - Rigidity
5. *gurugātratā* - Heaviness of the body
6. *ālasya* - Lassitude. Letharginess of the body
7. *mukhamādhurya* - Presence of a sweet taste in the mouth
8. *mukhasrāva* - Excessive salivation from the mouth
9. *śleṣmodgīraṇa* - Mucous expectoration
10. *balāsaka* - Loss of strength
11. *apaktiḥ* - Inability to digest the food taken
12. *hṛdayopalepa* - Sensation of the heart
13. *kāṭhopalepa* - Secretion of excessive mucous in the throat
14. *dhamanipraticaya* - Heaviness of the veins and nerves
15. *galagaṇḍa* - Enlargement of the glands of the neck
16. *atisthaulya* - Excessive obesity
17. *śītāgnitā* - Suppression of the digestive power; Loss of appetite
18. *udarda* - Urticaria, a kind of Erysipelas
19. *svetāvabhāṣatā* - Pallor of the skin
20. *svetamūtra-netra varcastva* - Whiteness of urine, eye and complexion - CS.1.20.17<sup>2</sup>

According to *Suśruta*, the absence of *vyāyāma* causes fattiness of the body (*sthaulya*) - SS.1.15.38<sup>3</sup>. The *Bhesajjamañjūsā* considers the absence of *vyāyāma* as a cause for many diseases - BM.1.54,55<sup>6</sup>.

Therefore, not only should the *ativyāyāma* be avoided but also injurious exercises or physical exercises which are injudicious be refrained. The physical practices which are injurious to the body, should be avoided. But it is not easy to stop them all at once, if it has been practiced for a long time. It is still possible to abstain from such injurious practices if we do it gradually.

Caraka, therefore, prescribes both 'gradual abstaining' and 'gradual practicing'. Caraka says; "An intelligent man should abstain gradually from all habitual practices that are injurious and adopt gradually practices that are beneficial." What is meant by 'Gradually' or '*krama*' also has been explained thus:

*"prakṣepācaye tābhyāṃ  
pādāṃśiko bhavet,  
ekāntaraṃ tataścordhvaṃ  
dvyantaramtathā."* - CS.1.7.37<sup>2</sup>

Progressive procedure or the '*krama*' of abstaining from the injurious practices and getting accustomed to the healthy practices is called '*pādāṃśika*'; that is one - fourth, half and three fourth. Caraka's this theory which is called '*pādāṃśika*' has been explained by Cakrapāṇidatta, the well versed commentator to the *Carakasamhitā*, in his commentary with an example; thus:

*"apatyāyavakādayo'bhyastāste tyāj yaḥraktaśā  
lyā dayaḥpathyā anabhyastāste sevyāḥ; tatra  
prathama dine yavakapādatrayaṃ raktaśālī nā  
mekāḥ pādāḥdvitīye divase dvau pathyasya pā  
dau dvāvapathyasya, evaṃ tṛtīye, evaṃ -  
dvitīyapādābhyāso dvyantaro bhavati; caturthe  
trayaḥ pādāḥ pathyasya eko'pathyasya evaṃ  
pañcame ṣaṣṭhe ca,*

*evam ṛṭiyapāda-bhyāsastryantaro bhavati; saptadina prabṛti tu catuṣpāda pathyābhyāsaḥ - CS.p.51<sup>2</sup>.*

(Yavaka (barley) etc. which is unwholesome should be abandoned though they have been practised; red-rice (*raktasāli*) etc. which are wholesome should be practised though unaccustomed. For the first day three fourth of the unwholesome and one fourth of the wholesome is to be practised. For the second day half of the unwholesome and the rest half to be filled with wholesome. The same for the third day. For the fourth day one fourth of unwholesome and three fourth of wholesome. The same for the fifth and sixth days. From the seventh day the wholesome only is to be practised. In this way one should get rid of faults gradually, and good habits be acquired gradually. *Suśruta* also prescribes the same method.

*"anucitamapyāseveta kramaśo na caikāntataḥ pādahīnat"* - SS.4.24.17<sup>2</sup>.

A bad habit should be gradually discontinued and a good one even when beneficial to health should similarly be gradually inculcated by a quarter only and at once. In this way are faults to be got rid of by the good, never to return and healthful habits are acquired without ever losing them again.

*"krameṇāpacitā doṣāḥ krameṇopacitā guṇāḥ, santo yāntyapunarbhāvam prakampyā bhavanti ca"* CS.1.7.38<sup>2</sup>

**Vyāyāma is not mere external physical exercise.**

Taber's cyclopedic medical Dictionary has defined the term physical activity and exercise as follows "A general term for any sort of muscular effort but especially the kinds intended to train condition or increase flexibility of the muscular and skeletal systems of the body"<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, according to the discussion made above, it is clear that the *vyāyāma* or physical

exercise mentioned in Ayurveda is not mere external physical exercise which supports the muscular and skeletal systems of the body.

*vyāyāma* works for the perfect health or 'physical fitness' which provides "the ability to carry out daily tasks with vigor and alertness, without undue fatigue and with ample energy to enjoy leisure-time pursuits and meet unforeseen emergencies"<sup>1</sup>. The definition on 'exercise and physical conditioning' done in the Encyclopedia Britannica: "the training of the body to improve its function and enhance its fitness." is the aim of *vyāyāma* in Ayurveda.

Both these traditions, i.e. Indian and Sri Lankan, have shown the result of *vyāyāma* in a similar way.

The *Carakasamhitā*:

*"Lāghavaṃ karmasāmarthyam  
sthyairyaṃ duḥkhasahiṣṇutā,  
doṣakṣayo'gnivṛddhiśca  
vyāyāmadupajāyate. CS.1.7.32<sup>2</sup>*

The consequences resulting from physical exercise are lightness of body, capacity for work, collectedness, power of enduring hardship, removal of all imperfections and augmentation of the digestive fire.

The *Aṣṭhāṅgahrdayasamhitā*

*"Lāghavaṃ karmasāmarthyam  
dīpt'o'gnirmedasa kṣayaḥ  
vibhaktaghanagātratvaṃ  
vyāyāmādupajāyate"* - AH.1.2.10<sup>9</sup>

(Lightness of the body, ability to do hard work, keen digestion, depletion of excess fat and stable and distinct physique accrue from *vyāyāma*).

The *Bhesajjamañjūsā*:

*Aggino dīpanammedakkhayo  
kammamatthatā  
Lāghavaṃ ghanadehattaṃ  
vyāyāma upajāyate - BM.3.8.<sup>5</sup>*

(Keen digestion, depletion of excess fat, ability to do hard work, lightness of the body and stable physique from physical exercise).

**Conclusion**

We, therefore, conclude here that Ayurveda also has given an importance to the physical exercise or *vyāyāma* concerning the maintenance of good health. The consequences resulting from physical exercise are not only lightness of body, capacity for work, collectedness, power of enduring hardship; but also it removes of all imperfections and augmentations of the digestive fire, which is very much needed for the balance of three humors which otherwise causes illness. Nevertheless, the intelligent person should never indulge in physical exercise as, according to Ayurveda, it results in fatigue, faintness, loss of vigor, thirst asthma, consumption, fever and attacks of cold. Further, the time, when the physical exercise to be done, should also be highly considered.

The use of the physical exercise, according to Ayurveda, can be included in both preventive and curative methods.

*“āhārācārāceṣṭāsu  
sukhārthī pretya cehaca,  
paramprayatnamātiṣṭhed-  
buddhimān hitasevane. - CS.1.7.60<sup>2</sup>*

(One endowed with intelligence and desirous of happiness both here and hereafter, should, bent upon achieving what is beneficial, bestow great care upon everything connected with food, deportment and physical practices).

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