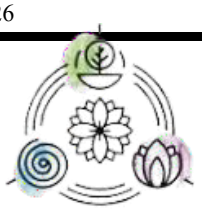
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Review Article

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"TRAYOPASTAMBHA (AHARA, NIDRA, BRAHMACHARYA): THE CONCEPT AND ITS PUBLIC HEALTH RELEVANCE"

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ABSTRACT

Background: The Charaka Samhita names three supports of life, trayopastambha: ahara (food), nidra (sleep) and brahmacharya (regulated sexual and sensory conduct). They are held to sustain the body when rightly used and to cause disease when misused. **Objective:** To review the classical statements on the three pillars, their relation to the doshas and to health, and their relevance to public health, in the light of modern evidence on diet, sleep and lifestyle. **Methods:** Classical texts were studied in translation. PubMed was searched in November 2026 for papers on trayopastambha, sleep and lifestyle in Ayurveda, and for selected modern reviews on sleep and health. **Results:** Charaka describes ahara as the primary support, with rules for its quality, quantity and timing; nidra as a cause of happiness, nourishment, strength and knowledge when proper, and of the opposite when improper; and brahmacharya as regulation of sexual and sensory indulgence. Modern studies show that both short and long sleep duration are associated with increased mortality, and that consensus guidance recommends at least seven hours of sleep for adults. Public health applications of Ayurveda emphasise prevention and lifestyle. **Conclusion:** Trayopastambha offers a compact framework for lifestyle medicine. Its pillars are consistent with major modern determinants of health, although specific classical prescriptions require testing.

KEYWORDS: Ayurveda, Trayopastambha, Ahara, Nidra, Brahmacharya, Sleep, Lifestyle, Public health

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INTRODUCTION

A building is held up by pillars, and the Charaka Samhita applies this image to life: the body is sustained by three supports, which are food, sleep and brahmacharya, and a person who uses them rightly is endowed with strength, complexion and growth, and lives the full span of life (Ch. Su. 11/35)[1]. The doctrine appears also in later works and in non-medical literature of the period, such as a Purana that deals with the dos and don'ts of food intake, sleep and sexual indulgence as the three subsidiary pillars of health[2]. Because chronic diseases are increasingly attributed to diet, sleep and behaviour, the doctrine has renewed public health relevance.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The Charaka Samhita, Sushruta Samhita and Ashtanga Hridaya were read in translation[1,3,4]. PubMed was searched in November 2026 for Ayurvedic literature on trayopastambha, ahara, nidra and brahmacharya, and for modern reviews on sleep duration and mortality. Indexed papers used include a historical review of a Purana[2], sleep studies and consensus statements[5,6], a review of circadian metabolism[7], a paper on One Health and Ayush[8] and reviews of Ayurveda in preventive practice[9,10].

OBSERVATION AND RESULTS

1. Ahara

Ahara is the first and most important pillar, and the Samhita states that food is the life of living beings (Ch. Su. 27)[1]. The rules for correct food include attention to eight factors that determine the usefulness of a meal: the nature of the food, its preparation, its combination, its quantity, the place, the time, the rules of eating and the person (Ch. Vi. 1/21)[1]. The Ashtanga Hridaya devotes a chapter to the right measure of food (matrashitiya) and gives rules for the portions that fill the stomach, the principal rule being that the stomach should be filled with solid food to about half, liquid food to about a quarter, and a quarter left empty for the movement of the doshas (A.H. Su. 8)[4]. Suitability (satmya) and the avoidance of incompatible combinations (viruddha ahara) are further considerations. Because diet influences the dhatus, agni and also mental quality, it links to the physiological and psychological theories discussed elsewhere in this series[1].

2. Nidra

Nidra is sleep. According to Charaka, happiness and unhappiness, nourishment and emaciation, strength and weakness, potency and impotence, knowledge and ignorance, and life and death depend on sleep that is properly or improperly taken (Ch. Su. 21/36)[1]. Sleep is described as arising when the mind and senses are tired and withdrawn from their objects. Day sleep is generally discouraged, but allowed in summer and for certain groups, such as children, the elderly, the weak and those exhausted by various causes, and is regarded as detrimental particularly to persons with excess kapha (Ch. Su. 21/36-50; A.H. Su. 7)[1,4]. Insomnia (anidra) is considered mostly due to vata and pitta disturbances and mental factors, and its management includes massage, bath, suitable food and mental tranquillity.

The modern evidence is consistent with the general statement that both too little and too much sleep are harmful. A systematic review and meta-analysis of prospective studies included 16 studies and over 1.38 million participants, and found that short sleep was associated with a greater risk of death (relative risk 1.12, 95% CI 1.06 to 1.18) and long sleep with a greater risk of death (relative risk 1.30, 95% CI 1.22 to 1.38)[5]. A consensus statement from the American Academy of Sleep Medicine and the Sleep Research Society recommends that adults sleep seven or more hours per night on a regular basis to promote optimal health[6]. Circadian research further notes that disruption of rhythms increases the risk of metabolic disease[7].

3. Brahmacharya

Brahmacharya is variously interpreted as celibacy, moderation in sexual activity and the regulation of the senses in general. In the context of the three supports it is understood as the regulated use of sexual and sensory energies in line with age, health and social role, and the avoidance of excess (Ch. Su. 11/35; A.H. Su. 7)[1,4]. The Samhitas set out specific rules for the frequency and timing of intercourse according to season and age. The doctrine links to the conservation of ojas and shukra, and to the notion of sadvritta, in which restraint of the senses is a part of conduct. Modern research does not examine brahmacharya as a unit, but studies on regulation of behaviour, stress and substance use address related parts of the concept, and interpretation should be cautious and respectful of

cultural and individual variation.

4. Public health relevance

Interest in Ayush systems as part of a One Health approach has led to a view that Ayush advocates preventive measures, such as daily and seasonal regimens and the use of rejuvenating herbs, and that these could be integrated into the health system through collaborative projects, research, training and the promotion of Ayush-based lifestyles[8]. A review of Ayurveda in clinical practice also positions the system as a possible adjunct in preventive, metabolic and mind-body medicine, in which lifestyle, mood and sleep regulation figure prominently, while pointing out the need for rigorous trials and standardised interventions[10]. A general account describes the Ayurvedic approach as one that addresses mind, body, behaviour and environment and emphasises prevention and health promotion[9].

DISCUSSION

The three pillars are well aligned with the major modifiable determinants of non-communicable disease, namely diet, sleep and behaviour. They are expressed in simple terms that can be communicated at community level. Several considerations should guide their use in public health. First, the classical rules need to be turned into specific, measurable recommendations, for instance a standard definition of regular meal timing, or of the time taken for sleep. Second, the evidence base for the particular classical prescriptions, such as the proportions of the stomach filled with food or the limitation of day sleep, is not yet developed, and trials should be designed to test them. Third, recommendations on brahmacharya need to be formulated with sensitivity and within an ethical framework that respects autonomy.

A practical research programme could include cohort studies of adherence to a defined Ayurvedic lifestyle score based on the three pillars in relation to metabolic and mental health outcomes, and pragmatic trials of community-level programmes of diet and sleep hygiene based on the classical principles.

CONCLUSION

Trayopastambha identifies three pillars of life, namely food, sleep and regulated conduct, that correspond with the main lifestyle determinants of health. Modern evidence, especially on sleep, supports the general principle. Rigorous translation of the classical rules into measurable recommendations and trials would strengthen their contribution to public health.

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