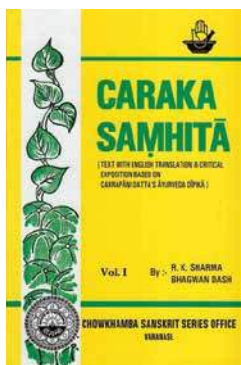


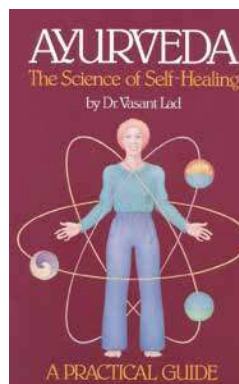
# Book reviews

Jack Coulehan, MD, MPH, Book Review Editor



## Caraka Samhita Volume I: Sutra Sthana

Ram Karan Sharma and  
Bhagwan Dash  
Chowkhamba Sanskrit  
Series Office, 2014  
619 pages



## Ayurveda: The Science of Self-Healing

Vasant Lad  
Lotus Press, 2019  
175 pages

Reviewed by Satyan K. Shah, MD (AOA, Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson School of Medicine, 2002)

Every invalid is a physician.  
—Irish Proverb

The mantra of modern allopathic physicians is evidence-based medicine. As such, the *Caraka Samhita*, an ancient Ayurvedic medical text, will require its readers to adjust their mindset. None of the book's extensive rules for maintaining health are supported by p-values or peer review. However, Ayurveda ("the science of life") has been continually practiced and valued for millennia. Physicians who read the book with an open mind will be rewarded with radically different ideas that are thought-provoking and in need of further study.

In Ayurveda, health is the balance of three doshas (bodily humors): pitta, vata, and kapha. The ratio of these vary from person-to-person, and are affected by many internal and external factors. When one of these doshas is in excess, disease can result. Treatment is directed at restoring homeostasis via lifestyle changes, medications, and various purgatives. This concept of doshas is one of many that *Caraka Samhita* assumes the reader has some familiarity with.

Dr. Lad's concise overview of Ayurveda is, therefore, a valuable pre-read. Unlike *Caraka Samhita*, the book entitled, *Ayurveda: The Science of Self-Healing*, is written specifically for western audiences. The numerous illustrations are especially helpful in understanding

difficult concepts like rasa and dhatu. For example, one chart summarizes the characteristics of people with each dosha subtype in 20 different domains. This includes typical sleep patterns, body habitus, and taste preferences. I was able to quickly determine my own dosha subtype using the chart; it was surprisingly accurate!

Summing up the stark contrast to modern medicine, *Caraka Samhita* states:

The causes of the diseases relating to both (mind and body) are three-fold: wrong utilization, non-utilization, and excessive utilization of time, mental faculties, and objects of sense organs.<sup>p39</sup>

Several things struck me about this statement. First, that genetics and family history, of great importance in allopathic medicine, are considered subordinate to the daily lifestyle choices a person makes. Secondly, the idea that what our eyes and ears take in could lead to somatic disease suggests new avenues for preventative research. To this point, there's now considerable data about how social media can affect the health of teenagers. Both books elaborate on ways to manage the senses, recommending everything from limited diet to libido control.

The authors explain the reference to time as seasonality. However, this idea goes well beyond the climate during a particular month. In Ayurveda, there are seasons within each day and over the course of a person's lifetime. Dosha strength fluctuates accordingly. In childhood, for example, there is greater susceptibility to congestion due to increased kapha during this stage

of life. Ayurveda teaches how to adjust one's lifestyle to counteract these effects. The summer's heat causes pitta to be aggravated; reducing physical exercise and avoiding spicy foods can help mitigate this. However, in the winter, one is advised to drink warm water.

*Caraka Samhita* discusses topics of interest to both primary care and specialty physicians. Scientists will find a wealth of potential hypotheses. Internal medicine practitioners may enjoy reading about Ayurvedic perspectives on diabetes, heart disease, and infections. There's even something for surgeons (abscesses) and dermatologists (topical ointments). Psychiatrists will appreciate the importance Ayurveda gives to mental health in disease causation.

One of the other notable themes is that diet is key to primary prevention and healing. However, this goes far beyond what to eat. Rules are prescribed regarding preparation, mealtimes, and taste combinations. Digestion is improved, it is stated, when a portion of the stomach is left empty. Eating before complete digestion of a prior meal (snacking) is deemed a causative factor for many illnesses. Incidentally, this is one of the few statements that has been corroborated by modern science<sup>1,2</sup>.

Medical professionalism discussions are peppered throughout *Caraka Samhita*, providing an interesting diversion from the primary subject matter. It would appear from the text's rebuke that unethical behavior was an issue even in those times:

Pseudo-physicians in the garb of doctors try to catch patients as the bird-catchers catch their prey in the net. They are far away from the textual knowledge, practical experience, knowledge about the time of administering the therapy and its dosage. They are like the messengers of Death on the Earth; hence, they should be boycotted.<sup>p591</sup>

*Caraka Samhita* can be quite challenging to get through. It reads like an encyclopedia and is organized in a way unfamiliar to allopathic physicians. The dosha concept, for example, is explained in a piecemeal manner over the course of the book. The original Sanskrit text is included with attendant limitations imposed by translation. Most of the ideas contained in the book are secular, but it is obvious that the border between medicine and religion was fairly indistinct in the past.

For these reasons, *Ayurveda: The Science of Self-Healing* complements *Caraka Samhita* well. Dr. Lad is an accomplished physician and educator, having run America's foremost school of Ayurveda for several decades. His text includes topics largely absent in *Caraka Samhita*, such as qualitative assessment of the pulse. One illustration shows where on the tongue the diseases of eight different organ systems are manifest. That is to say, a discoloration in the center of the tongue could indicate a pancreatic disorder in a manner akin to referred pain. In this modern era of sophisticated laboratory and radiological diagnostics, perhaps there is yet more to be gained from simple physical examination.

Ayurveda's true value may be to broaden the modern physician's thinking about prevention and causation. The fundamental message is that patients have much healing power within their own hands. Though the lack of scientific proof limits applicability, there is a wealth of testable hypotheses. Perhaps one day, new treatments will be a rediscovery of something very old.

#### References

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