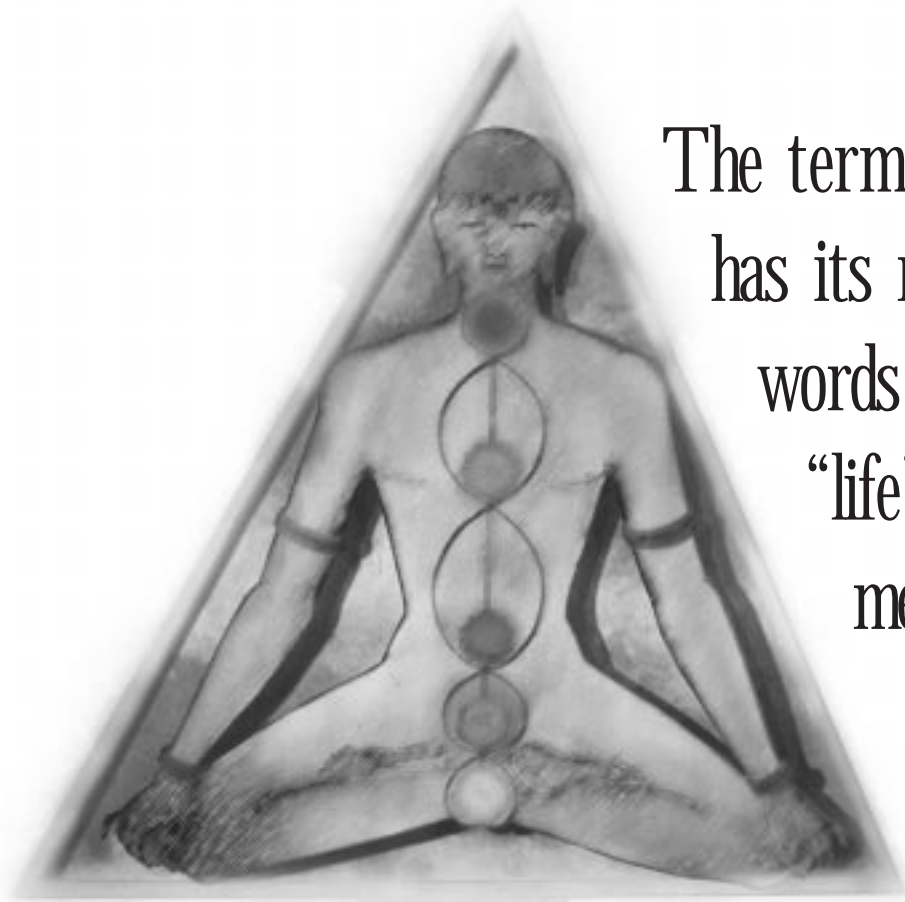


# Ayurveda:

## The Mind-Body Connection

To what extent are the mind and body connected? Can the mind influence the body? According to the principles of ayurveda, the link is strong.



The term “ayurveda”  
has its roots in Sanskrit  
words *ayus*, which means  
“life” and *veda*, which  
means “knowledge.”

“We are coming to know that the mind plays an important role in creating the diseases of the body,” says Satu Somani, Ph.D., professor of pharmacology and toxicology at SIU School of Medicine, who strongly believes in the ayurvedic philosophy. “Ayurvedic medicine treats the root cause of the disease, not just the symptoms, which is very important to maintaining good health.”

The origins of ayurveda stretch back 5,000 years to India, where it was the primary form of medicine. The term has its roots in Sanskrit words *ayus*, which means “life” and *veda*, which means “knowledge.”

This multi-strategy medical approach addresses physical, psychological and spiritual health. Its foundation lies in the belief that disease is caused by the imbalance of three basic physiological principles in the body called doshas, universal energies that are believed to govern

all bodily functions. Individual programs of nutrition, exercise and meditation are used to maintain the balance of the doshas.

Ayurvedic practices include the physical and breathing exercises of yoga, massage, meditation and dietary practices including herbal remedies. “Ayurvedic medicine treats the whole self — mind, body and senses — together,” notes Dr. Somani.

As a medical modality, ayurveda and yoga are used to treat diabetes, heart disease and psychosomatic problems, among others. “Ayurveda can reduce the intensity of chronic diseases and control them,” says Dr. Somani. He also recommends massages with herbal oils to help manage anxiety. “Stress plays a role in organic disease,” he believes.

Yoga, an ancient Indian practice, uses breathing and stretching exercises to enhance the circulatory sys-

tem, strengthen respiratory muscles and relieve stress. It is used as an adjunctive therapy for addiction, AIDS/HIV, anxiety, headaches, multiple sclerosis, fibromyalgia, chronic pain, weight loss, and heart health, among many others. Even just five or 10 minutes of yoga a day can be beneficial, says Dr. Somani, a yoga enthusiast himself. “Yoga is a physical exercise that also allows concentration of the mind” — which corresponds with the mind-body interdependency principle of ayurveda.

Dr. Somani calls ayurveda “deductive medicine,” meaning that it has been handed down through the ages. “Experience has proven that it works,” he says. In fact, Dr. Somani grew up with ayurvedic practitioners in his homeland of India, where he and his family benefited from ayurveda. A 40-year resident of the United States, Dr. Somani has been practicing the principles and studying how

they can augment modern medical techniques. "We cannot ignore the benefits of these ancient medicines," he says. Published studies have documented reductions in blood pressure, cholesterol and stress levels in people using ayurvedic therapies.

As a researcher, Dr. Somani casts a scientific eye on ayurvedic practices, studying their medicinal benefits, especially those of herbal remedies and their possible interaction with prescribed medications.

He and other SIU researchers are studying cisplatin, a highly toxic anticancer agent with potential side effects that can include hearing loss and kidney failure. Turning to ayurvedic principles, Dr. Somani suspects that herbal drugs could protect against the side effects by enhancing the body's antioxidant system. He is working on experiments to test the antioxidant properties of plant extracts like ginger and ginkgo biloba in combating these side effects.

Standardizing herbal drugs is the most important step in integrating ayurvedic principles into modern medicine, says Dr. Somani. "Because people are familiar with these kinds of herbs, they will be more willing to use them," he explains. "Plus, these drugs are not that expensive compared to prescribed medication."

Ayurveda plays an important role in Dr. Somani's philosophies about disease. "Physiology is created by the mind and the body," he says. "The root cause of a disease may be related to organic and mental conditions." He advocates ayurveda as a lifestyle choice rather than a quick remedy.

Dr. Somani is a member of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine task force led by SIU professor Sharon Hull, M.D. The School first became interested in ayurvedic prin-

ciples more than 20 years ago, when Dr. Somani and other medical professionals from the School of Medicine visited India to learn more about ayurvedic medicine as a source of primary care in rural areas. The visitors received a four-week crash course about how ayurvedic medicine benefits a large population at very little cost. Dr. Somani also has lectured throughout the United States and in India on the benefits of ayurvedic medicine.

Dr. Somani aims to make students aware of the benefits of ayurveda. The professor is teaching an elective course on the subject for fourth-year SIU medical students. "The goals of the course are to educate students about what ayurvedic medicine is used for, how a disease can be treated with it, and what the benefits are."

Students can't learn everything about ayurvedic medicine in one course, but Dr. Somani says they should gain a basic understanding of it and realize that "ayurveda is something that should not be ignored."

Dr. Somani believes the popularity of complementary and alternative medicines will continue. "People are getting tired of the high cost of medical care. Of course they're going to seek other ways of staying healthy. Alternative medicines can cut down the cost of health care." But he emphasizes that people need to be educated about their options. "We are more in danger of harming our bodies if we only have half the knowledge."

As more physicians and patients understand the alliance between the mind and the body, Dr. Somani believes that ayurveda will be recognized as the key to wellness. "If there's a perfect harmony in the body, mind and senses, we can keep in good health." ■

