

DEGENERATIVE DISEASES – AN AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: *The author presents in this article the ayurvedic explanation for the genesis of degenerative diseases.*

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda is the system of medicine that has evolved in India with a logical foundation. The fundamentals of this system are true for all times. The Garden of Eden which man had to abandon when he fell from Grace, “the thousand evils to which the flesh is heir to” has afflicted man from his birth and the dawn of medicine must have synchronized with the dawn of diseases.

In spite of spectacular advancement by modern medicine mainly through the advances in chemical and physical sciences, there is a vast number of diseases which has eluded its therapeutic ambit and the study of a system of medicine that has been in vogue from time immemorial may have a fruitful combination to make in the overall alleviation of human sufferings.

Civilization may change but humanity remains the same. Changes in the

environment, new modes of living, new avocations all might contribute to certain modification of a disease or the appearance of a new disease, but the disease attacks the human host and as long as human being is very much the same. The methods may differ in their form and content but the essentials of approach remain the same.

The experimental methods have serious limitations, especially in the world of medicine. The truths and findings given to the world a few years back with a wealth of findings and statistics are controvertible and less impressive. We should all believe in progress, but we should without doubt fight the temptation to look on mere newness as virtue. It should always be remembered that Ayurveda is not just another system of medicine, but is the science of life, of health living, of preventing and curing diseases, of personal and social hygiene.

damage just short of actual death”. It may be excessive accumulation of normal substances in the cytoplasm or the appearance of abnormal substance.

The term “damage just short of actual death” impels that degeneration are examples of

moderate damage or injury which may be reversed. However, it is only true of early stages for change of long duration become permanent.

The factors influencing degrees of damage are-

1. Nature of vitiation
2. The duration of the action between the vitiating factors and the part.
3. The nature of the tissue affected, and
4. The inherent susceptibility of certain cells to partial degree of vitiation.

The degrees of damage is of three types namely-

1. Mild damage – No structural damage recognizable
2. Moderate damage – Disturbances in cellular metabolism with the structure altered and
3. Severe damage – Total breakdown of cellular metabolism with extensive structural damage.

According to modern findings a group of diseases of nervous system has been designated as degenerative, indicating that they are characterized by gradually evolving, relentlessly progressive occurring for reasons that are entirely unknown. Identification of these diseases depends upon careful, thorough exclusion of such possible causative factors as infections, metabolic derangements and intoxicants. Most of the diseases classified as degenerative are associated with genetic

predisposition and this group of diseases present itself in the form of several clinical syndromes.

The characteristic of this disease is that they begin insidiously and run a gradually progressive course that can be extended over many years. The course of the diseases is more protracted than that of the metabolic disorders and the signs and symptoms are protracted when any dramatic event in the patient's life has occurred. The progress of this disease in the long run is uninfluenced by attempted therapeutic measures and the changes brought about by them tend to have a bilateral symmetric distribution, which is the distinguishing factor of other neurological diseases.

Another striking feature is that many diseases classed as degenerative involve almost selectively, particular anatomically or physiologically related systems while leaving others entirely intact. These diseases invariable result in tissue loss, rather than in new tissue formation. The presence of certain intra-cytoplasmic accumulation or inclusion are also prominent factors.

Ayurvedic viewpoint

From the above description it is very difficult to come to a comprehensive conclusion regarding the explanation, of these disease in our system. We cannot blindly correlate these to the diseases of the *Kevala vathika* type or to the *Avarana* type for in *Avarana* there are very little chances for *Dhatu shosha*. It is essential to explain these diseases from modern finding in our term and identify its pathogenesis (*samprapti*) and the primary vitiating factors (*hethus*) and also the principles of treatment and method of approach.

The material world is composed of the five principle elements or *bhutas* and they are in various grades of combinations and varieties in matter occur due to varieties in combination and permutations. The human body with its organs are all composed of these five principles as the universe around us.

Concept of change

Change perceptible or not are characteristics of the whole of nature both subtle and gross. There are three important principles involved namely,

1. The principle that causes the change
2. The principle that undergoes the change and
3. The principle that brings these two together and which controls and regulates so that rhythmic and orderly changes taken place.

One may misunderstand the explanation of the causation of the universe according to the *Samkhya* philosophy as nothing more than a fable because it explains that each factor come out or is born from prior. When it is known that each prior factor is the substratum of the latter it becomes an acceptable truth. Change in the gross plain is only a displacement in the subtle plain, the matter called our body is the gross plain and the elements which constitute it is the gross plain and the elements which constitute it is the gross plain and the elements which constitute it is the subtle one. A drug causes change to furnish displacement in the plain of elements which itself reflects as the change in the gross plain, the observable body. The gross is constituted by the subtle and the subtle by the subtlest, they are different and one the

same time. All the things in the universe have the same subtle structure and will effect all plains of existence. Each plain has its own identify and is sensitive of its needs and capable of accepting and rejecting and to treat diseases, we have to understand the science of that particular plain to understand its impropriety and have to select comprehensively.

Chemistry, the science of elements and therapeutic approach based on this science displaces elements and causes change in the grossest and superficial plains producing quick results and leaves all other subtler plains in a state or flux.

Prolonged use of drugs according to this knowledge causes such a change that the system of the plain as a whole cannot accommodate with the improper status of the subtlest plain. Hence this system is insensitive to comprehend the whole and to maintain and establish relative equilibrium.

Displacement in the subtlest plain is change instead of displacement in all other plains and manouvers according to the signs of this plain are comprehensive and do not produce controversies and work wonderfully in chronic and complicated diseases.

Hence, the principle that causes changes in *vata*, the principle that undergoes this change is *kapha* and the principle that brings the two together and controls and regulates the change is *pitta*.

In *kapha*, the two *bhutas* predominant are *prithvi* and *Jala*. *Prithvi* is the organized and compact form. The *Yoni* (substratum) of creation of *udaka* (*Jala*) and *Prithvi* is the *Adhisthanai* (substrate).

For the capacity to move and grow and for all activities and movement *Vayu* comes into

play. Space for the material to grow and exist is *akaasha*. There is this organized material on one side and growth and movement on the other. The coordination between the two is brought about by *Teja*. The capacity to grow by assimilation of dissimilar substance is by *Teja*. That which allows things to combine is *Jala* and that which holds together all materials is *Prithvi* and *Aakash*a which is *Avakasha* (space) is the scope to grow.

Contributory factors

This is an age of occurrence of many new diseases or syndromes. The human system with its natural vitality and strength and its mutual symbiotic relationship with the healthy and pleasant full “nature” and man’s strict observance of code of conduct of regimen is able to alleviate the natural variations of the body humours. These variations are tolerated only to a certain extent by this system which is constituted with mutually contradictory mechanisms.

We live in a very vicious environment. The four factory namely air, water, place and time are vitiated. Pollution is very high. Draining of toxic effluents into our river which are the major sources of water are all contributory to present day ill health.

Drug induced disease or iatrogenic diseases are very much prevalent these days. Iatrogenic disorders occur when the deleterious effects of a drug produce pathological conditions independent of the conditions for which the drug is given. In this context it is worth quoting E.F. Schumacher on clinical iatrogenesis, “the spirit of violent technology has invaded the medical profession. We want quick results from quick and violent means. So much so that we claim that a very high percentage of illness and induced by a doctor. The only

advise we can give is avoid a doctor when you are ill”. He further adds, “the so called ultra modern hospitals posses a particular intimidating environment for the patients, lying in a bed surrounded by air jets, buttons, lights, invaded by tubes and wires, beset by numerous members of the health care team, transported to special laboratories and x-ray chambers replete with blinking lights and strange sounds, it is little wonder that the patient has all chances of losing their sense of reality”.

Excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures, alcoholism, smoking, etc., all lead to the diminution of ojas or vitality thus paving way for occurrence of fatal diseases. Clinical conditions described in *ojakshaya* are more manifest and pronounced these days.

Anxiety and tension are the products of modern civilization. Every individual suffers from mental agony a distress. The whole human race seems to function as a misguided missile without a target or a destination.

Non-observance of the rules and regulations laid down in daily regimen and seasonal regimen, application of oil on the body and head seem to be out of fashion and antique to the present day people.

Virtual non-use of the *shodhana* therapy indicated in the respective season to get rid of the *doshas* accumulated. This concept is being totally neglected and hence the result is that the natural variations in the humours are not dealt with duly and is present in the body in the form of a dormant force.

The present day dietetic rules and restrictions overlooking concepts such as *Viruddha* etc., but based only on caloric value and moreover advising people to keep

away from wholesome food articles such as ghee play an important role in the occurrence of these new generation of diseases. The increased indulgence in food articles which vitiate the *vata* and *pitta dosha* and non-use of food articles which have *jeevaniya* and *brimhana* qualities also contribute for the occurrence of such diseases.

The symptomatic treatment much in prevalence these days without considering the disease process but by just suppressing it in spite of the knowledge of its pathogenesis is a sorry state of affairs. The disease is a state of continuous abnormal movement from one condition or stage to another as is evident from the description of this *kiya kalas* or the stages of pathogenesis. This causes the morbid humours in the body to the dormant and is responsible for all diseases.

Approach of Management

From a generalized view all the diseases are degenerative in its net result, for the sixth and last stage of pathogenesis is the *Bhedaavastha*, but for diseases of this type it is due to the disease process which invariably disintegrate the body tissues and reduce it.

As mentioned earlier the principle of cohesion is *Jala* which is the fifth *bhoota* in the evolution having *sthira bhava* and is the *Yoni* (substrate) of *sristi* and the *adhisthana* is the *Prithvi bhootha*. The other *bhootas* are in incognisable cohesion with these two *bhootas*. The plain of existence of the *agnitatwa* is in between existence and complete disintegration of matter and hence this *Agnitatwa* is only perceivable when the matter is in existence. This is the reason for which our acharyas have equated the body to Agni and the

apachaya (disintegration) of this *agnitatwa* is in the sensorial perception *vasthu naasha* or destruction of matter. Thus the disintegration of matter is caused by the inherent *Agnitatwa*. The deterioration of the wholly wholesome unctuousness (*shudha snigdha*) in matter takes place when the *Agni* principle becomes predominant. The existence of the body is due to the equilibrium maintained by this wholly wholesome unctuousness. This is the reason for attributing *ojas* (vital essence) as *Bala* (strength).

Degenerative diseases are basically an increased interaction of the *Agni* principles on the homologous unctuousness (*snigdhata*) and can be inferred to the reduction of the properties of the soft elements (*sowmya bhavas*) of the body due to improper permutations and combinations of the properties of *Vaayu* such as *laghu*, *rooksha*, *khara* and *sookshma*. These types of interaction are very selective with respect to the degrees of vitiation, the tissues and the structural consistency of which may also be very selective.

The importance of genetically predisposition in these diseases may be explained with reference to the pathology of the *Beejabhaga avayava* of the particular *Beeja* either due to its *upaghatha* or *upathapa*.

The degenerative phases can be explained in three stages namely congestive stage, inflammatory stage and the disintegrative stage. In degenerative diseases the stages of congestion inflammation is not perceivable rather than saying that it is not of much importance because the amount of unctuousness is very minute and these phases pass off very quickly and the disease process is identifiable only in the third phase which is the stage of "just short of actual death" of the cell. These changes may be

expressed in the hindrance for the passing of impulse through the cells due to the developed resistance in them. This invariably results in the block of transport of nutrient material to the particular cell or related tissue resulting in degeneration. In due course of time the structure may disappear due to the sensitivity of the cells towards the severity of the interaction of properties of *Vavyu* and *Agni* (pitta).

Even though the body structures are maintained by the *kapha* by its unctuous properties, the consistency of these properties in each structure is specific and hence an interaction of a particular degree will affect the particular structure in different manner with expressions of varied signs and symptoms.

The concept of degeneration in the broader sense is just the opposite to that of the proliferative phase or the occurrence of neoplasm. The reduction of the nutritive quality such as *Brihmana* and *Jeevana* qualities leads to the increase in qualities such as *rooksha*, *khara*, etc., by which *Vayu dosha* gets associated along with the principle of *Agni* and hence a predominance of the *Vata pathika dosha kopa*. These processes are not of a secondary or alternative nature but is a simultaneous vitiation of all the factors.

The incidence of the diseases is insidious and abrupt for they are the manifestation of the *atma bhavai* (inherent properties) of *vata* which immediately results in the disease process without any premonitory signs and symptoms. The *Majja* and the *Medha dhatus* are prominently involved in these diseases and the *roga marga* is the *Madhyama roga margay* and involves important *marma sthanas* (vital centres) such as *shiras*.

The therapeutic measures to be adopted in these types of diseases is *Brimhana* because the disease process results in the reduction of body tissues or *langhana*. The *dravya* administered should be *Ushna* and *snigdha* in quality because *sheetha* and *snigdha* qualities would give *snehana* only in the superficial level and would be similar to painting superficially a tube which is rusted inside. The *ushna guna* permeates the *sneha guna* into the structures and enhances strength (*Bala*) to the same.

The importance of administration of *rasayana* or rejuvenative therapy is highlighted in texts such as *Bhavaprakasha* and *Bhaishajya ratnavali*. *Rasayana* may be of no effect if provided initially because there is an increased resistance in the cells and the transport of nutrients towards them is also very meager. Hence we have to enhance the *Srothases* by increasing their conductivity and then provide *rasayanas*. Since the dosha predominance is of *vata paithika* type of use of ghee may be very beneficial. The physician should try to induce *snigdha guna* by whatever means possible. As a rule *Shodhana* therapy may be negated but very mild *Shodhana* therapy may be adopted taking every care in diseases which is characterized by the formation of intracellular inclusions. Mercurial (*Rasa*) preparations occupy a very important place in the treatment of these diseases because they are capable of rejuvenating the body and bestow vitality and strength by their very powerful and quick action.

CONCLUSION

The knowledge of the changing world and the unchanging principles of nature should be clearly understood and elicited. The wider the knowledge the greater are the changing phenomenon its theory can embrace and greater the field of application

of its principles. The truth of a theory or principles being deep and vast in its content lies in its changelessness and its capacity to embrace the theories of the changing phenomenon. Some have criticized Ayurveda on the ground that its theories and principles are age old and antique and have

not changed with the passage of time. This is not true because ayurveda can explain in its own terms and change and indicate effective methodology without finding the need to shift its ground and change its form.

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