



AYURVEDA AND DHARMASHASTRA: ANCIENT WISDOM FOR HOLISTIC LIVING

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Article History

Received : 25 April 2025; Revised : 28 May 2025; Accepted : 07 June 2025; Published : 30 June 2025

Abstract: This article explores the interconnected wisdom of Ayurveda and Dharmashastra, two foundational pillars of ancient Indian knowledge. While Ayurveda focuses on holistic health and well-being, and Dharmashastra outlines moral and legal duties, both stem from a shared Vedic worldview that emphasizes harmony between the individual and the cosmos. The systems converge in their practical guidance—such as routines, dietary habits, and ethical conduct—linking physical health with moral responsibility. Together, they offer a timeless framework for living a balanced, ethical, and purposeful life, especially relevant in addressing modern physical and societal challenges.

INTRODUCTION

India's intellectual and spiritual legacy is rooted in a rich tradition of interconnected disciplines. Two of the most profound among these are Ayurveda, the science of life and health, and Dharmashastra, the body of literature that outlines moral, social, and legal duties. Though they belong to different categories of knowledge—Ayurveda being primarily medical and Dharmashastra being ethical and legal—they share a common vision: the harmonization of individual life with cosmic order.

ORIGINS AND FOUNDATIONS

Ayurveda, often considered the oldest system of medicine in the world, finds its roots in the Atharva Veda and later classical texts such as the Charaka

To cite this paper:

Arumita Dey (2025). Ayurveda and Dharmashastra: Ancient Wisdom for Holistic Living. *International Journal of Applied Business and Management Sciences*. 6(1-2), 43-47.

Samhita and Sushruta Samhita. It is a holistic system, focusing not just on curing disease but on promoting balance between body, mind, and spirit. The term itself means “knowledge of life,” and it embodies a preventative, lifestyle-oriented approach to health. Ayurveda emphasizes the role of diet, behavior, and environment in maintaining health and preventing illness.

Dharmashastra, on the other hand, is a category of Sanskrit texts that codify the laws of dharma—righteous conduct. Key texts include the Manusmriti, YajnavalkyaSmriti, and various commentaries that evolved over centuries. These texts guided individuals on how to live ethically within their social and cosmic roles. Dharma in this context is not just religious duty, but encompasses ethics, law, morality, and even psychology. It defines the duties of individuals based on their varna (social classification), ashrama (stage of life), and personal capabilities.

SHARED PHILOSOPHICAL GROUND

Both Ayurveda and Dharmashastra arise from the Vedic worldview, which sees the universe as an interconnected web of duties (dharma), energies (gunas and doshas), and actions (karma). In Ayurveda, health is achieved when the three doshas—Vata, Pitta, and Kapha—are balanced. These doshas are bio-energetic forces derived from the five elements: space, air, fire, water, and earth.

In Dharmashastra, righteousness is the balance of duties in accordance with one’s station in life. It upholds a vision of social harmony and cosmic order, where every being has a role and responsibility. A person who lives according to dharma not only contributes to social stability but also aligns with the cosmic law (Rta), ensuring spiritual progress.

This shared grounding reflects an integrative approach to life: where health, ethics, and spirituality are not compartmentalized but seen as aspects of the same reality. An imbalance in one area inevitably affects the others.

INTERSECTIONS IN PRACTICE

The connection between Ayurveda and Dharmashastra is not just theoretical; it influences practical life. For instance:

Daily and Seasonal Routines: Ayurveda prescribes daily (dinacharya) and seasonal (ritucharya) routines to maintain health. These routines are in line with the dharmic idea of discipline and self-regulation.

Diet and Conduct: Dietary habits in Ayurveda are closely related to the concept of *sattva* (purity), *rajas* (activity), and *tamas* (inertia), which are also discussed in Dharmashastra in the context of character and ethics.

Hygiene and Purity: Concepts of personal hygiene, physical purity, and mental clarity are foundational in both systems. The Dharmashastra's rules on cleanliness, especially before prayer or eating, often reflect Ayurvedic understanding of contamination and health.

Achar (Conduct) and Vichar (Thought): Both systems emphasize the importance of ethical conduct and right thinking. Ayurveda teaches that mental states affect physical health, while Dharmashastra warns against *adharma* (unrighteousness) as leading to social and spiritual decay.

ETHICAL MEDICINE AND MORAL HEALTH

Ayurveda is not merely a science of herbs and treatments—it is a moral science. The *vaidya* (Ayurvedic physician) is expected to embody qualities of compassion, honesty, and detachment. The *Charaka Samhita* details the ethical code for physicians, emphasizing that they should treat patients without discrimination and not be motivated by greed.

Ayurveda is not just a system of treatments—it is a profound ethical and spiritual approach to health. The Ayurvedic tradition recognizes that a physician's moral character is as important as their technical knowledge. According to the *Charaka Samhita*, one of the foundational texts of Ayurveda, a *vaidya* (physician) must embody compassion (*karuna*), truthfulness (*satya*), patience (*kshama*), and purity of thought and behavior. They are advised to treat every patient with equal concern, regardless of their social status, and to avoid greed or desire for fame.

The *Charaka Samhita* explicitly lays out a code of conduct for physicians, including:

- Not exploiting patients financially or emotionally.
- Keeping medical knowledge secret from the unqualified.
- Maintaining personal and professional cleanliness.
- Avoiding treatment of those whose conditions are incurable purely for profit.
- Providing emergency aid without hesitation.

In this sense, Ayurveda establishes a sacred trust between the physician and patient. Healing is not just a transactional service but a dharmik duty—a responsibility rooted in spiritual and ethical values.

Dharmashastra similarly considers the role of healers and the moral obligations of caregivers. It outlines duties toward the sick, elderly, and vulnerable, reinforcing the dharmic duty to serve others with kindness and integrity.

On the other hand, Dharmashastra literature often outlines the societal responsibility toward health and care. It recognizes health as essential for the performance of dharma—because one must be physically and mentally sound to carry out religious duties, support family, and serve society. Therefore, caring for the sick, elderly, disabled, and vulnerable is considered a punya (meritorious act), and neglecting them is a form of adharma (unrighteousness).

Some key principles from Dharmashastra include:

- The grhastha (householder) is expected to offer food and shelter to the needy, including the ill.
- Acts of seva (selfless service) to the sick are equated with direct service to God.

Ritual texts often specify purification rites not only for spiritual cleansing but also to maintain physical hygiene, showing an integration of health with morality.

Moreover, both systems acknowledge the mind-body-spirit connection. Ayurveda teaches that mental states such as greed, anger, and envy contribute to physical illness, while qualities like contentment, compassion, and discipline promote health. Similarly, Dharmashastra promotes moral restraint and self-discipline as essential to a virtuous and fulfilling life.

In this unified vision, personal health and moral health are interdependent. A society that values ethical medical care and compassionate social conduct becomes not only physically healthier but spiritually stronger. Such a vision is remarkably modern in its emphasis on holistic well-being, equity, and social responsibility, showing that the ethical foundations of Ayurveda and Dharmashastra are as relevant today as they were in ancient times.

RELEVANCE TODAY

In today's rapidly changing world, the wisdom of Ayurveda and Dharmashastra holds great relevance. With increasing mental stress, lifestyle diseases, and ethical dilemmas, these ancient systems offer guidance:

Ayurveda provides tools for holistic wellness through personalized diet, herbal remedies, yoga, and meditation.

Dharmashastra offers a moral compass to navigate complex social roles and personal responsibilities.

Moreover, the emphasis on self-discipline, compassion, and awareness found in both systems can lead to sustainable living and inner peace. They remind us that true health is not just the absence of illness, but a state of harmony between the body, mind, and spirit—aligned with ethical living and higher purpose.

CONCLUSION

Together, Ayurveda and Dharmashastra do not just address the body and society in isolation—they promote a life in harmony with the self, others, nature, and the divine. These systems invite us to live not only longer lives, but more meaningful and balanced ones. In rediscovering their wisdom, we reconnect with a holistic vision of life where health and dharma walk hand in hand.

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