

AN APPRAISAL ON AYURVEDA INSIGHTS OF AGNI (DIGESTIVE FIRE) AND ITS CLINICAL SIGNIFICANCE

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda is ancient science of medicine. It is time-tested and highly practiced branch of medicine. Ayurveda is based on basic principles of *Tridosha*, *Panchamahabhuta*, *Agni* etc. Equilibrium of health and treatment of diseases is the prime aim of Ayurveda. Ample of references are available in the overview of healthy body like Dinacharya, Ritucharya, Ratricharya, Panchakarma. Shaman and Shodhana are the two modes of treatment. Acharya Vaghbhat has beautifully described the concept of Agni. Agni plays a vital role in the body. Any imbalance in Agni leads to various kind of diseases in body. Mandagni is the root cause of Vyadhis. To understand the pathophysiology of diseases and treatment in a proper way, it is very important to understand the concept behind Agni. This article is aimed on giving a thorough outlook on Agni described in Ayurveda classics.

KEYWORDS: Ayurveda, Agni, Health, Vyadhi.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda science is a complete combination of theoretical principles and applied aspect in clinical scenario beautifully explained in Samhita Granthas. Acharyas have worked for several years to give a detailed explanation about each and every topic. Agni is one of such topics widely described in Ayurveda treatise. The principles behind concept of Agni are very important in diagnosis and treatment.

Ayurveda has considered AGNI a very important entity for the maintenance of good health. Ayurveda says that if AGNI is not in its normal state than it will result in the form of a disease. The entire basic physics and biology of Ayurveda are greatly different from the modern basic sciences and the understanding of the structure and function of human body, the pathology and diagnostics are based on its own theories of Triguna (Sattva- Raja-Tama), Tanmatra, Panchamahabhuta, Tridosha (Vata-Pitta-Kapha) and AGNI. In Ayurveda, the term "Agni" is used in the sense of digestion of food and metabolic products. Agni converts food in the form of energy, which is responsible for all the vital functions of our body. This agni is not in the form of flame as the

terrestrial fire but is in the form of liquid which is called as Pitta in Ayurveda. There is no agni apart from pitta and pitta itself is agni asserts Caraka.^[1] Consumption of food may be various forms i.e. eatables, beverages, linctus (licked) and masticable foods, which is wholesome if consumed in suitable quantity and free from contamination. These substances undergo metabolic transformation by the effect of Jatharagni, Bhutagni and Dhatvagni. Initially Jatharagni gives stimulation to Bhutagni because consumed food is Panchabhautika, it has to undergo transformation by the respective Bhutagni's then only it becomes easy for tissue metabolism by Dhatvagnis. Then processed metabolic products circulate inside the srotas continuously by the help of Vata dosha. This favours the development, strength, complexion and happiness as well as growth of tissues. Dhatus remain in their normalcy after receiving respective nutrients from metabolized food substances. Jatharagni is the main principal substance responsible for disease and health. During its normalcy it is responsible for longevity, complexion, strength, health, enthusiasm, well built, luster, immunity (ojas), temperature, other Agni's (bhutagni and dhatvagni) and other vital functions all are

dependent on jathargni. Therefore healthy state of body and diseased condition is entirely dependent on status of agni.^[2]

Kosthagni

The food ingested, is acted upon by the normal Kosthagni can be correlated with pachaka pitta and it is divided into two parts- the Sarabhaga or the Ahara rasa (the essence of food) and Kitta bhaga (the waste products of food). The sarabhaga or ahara rasa undergoes further changes being acted upon by the bhutagnis and gets converted into Rasadhātu- the first dhātu (first tissue) of the body. The activities of kosthagni and bhutagnis together form the Ahara paka or digestion of food. The rasadhātu contains the nutrient materials derived from the food and required by the dhatus (tissues), This rasa dhātu circulates all over the body supplying the nutrients to all the other dhatus, which utilize this material for their growth (metabolism).^[3]

Importance of Agni

Bala (strength), varna (colour), swasthya (health), utsaha (enthusiasm), upacaya (development of the body), prabha (complexion), ojas (strength), tejas (valour), vaya (age), and even ayu (life) - all depend on Agni and its function (fire-like activity). So long as agni is normal, man can have a healthy and long life, loss of Agni leads to loss of life.^[4] Foods containing the nutrient materials of the dhatus can be of help to the dhatus, only after they are cooked (digested) well by the Agni.

Concept of PITTA & AGNI in Ayurveda

It is a question of debate to say pitta and agni are one and the same. Is there any separate agni other than pitta? Or pitta itself is agni? For this Sushruta said no separate agni is found other than pitta. It is due to the properties of hotness in pitta leading to burning cooking and such similar functions performed by pitta are considered as Agni itself & it is called antaragni. During diminished state, use of similar properties of drugs advised & during increased state resorting to cold treatments have been advocated, no mention of Agni found in the texts.^[5]

Large food molecules are broken down to smaller molecules both mechanically & chemically by the action of pitta. Further pitta helps for the process of transporting these smaller molecules across the intestinal wall which facilitates absorption & lastly undigested portions of food and waste products are removed from the body.

Types of Agnis

Agni is innumerable because of its presence in each and every dhātu paramanu (cell) of the body. But, enumeration of the number of Agnis varies in various classical Ayurvedic texts, as shown below Charaka has mentioned about 13 Agnis. Jatharagni -1, Bhutagni -5, Dhatvagni -7.^[6]

According to Sushruta, five types of Agnis are illustrated, viz. Pachakagni, Ranjakagni, Alochakagni,

Sadhakagni and Bhrajakagni.^[7] However, there is an indirect reference of Five Bhutagnis underlying in the brief description made to the transformation of food stuff.^[8]

Vagbhata has described different types of Agni, viz. - Aaudaryagni-1, Bhutagnis-5,^[9] Dhatvagnis -7, Dhoshagni -3 and Malagni-3.^[10] Pitta -5.

Sharangadhara has recognized five pittas only (Pachak, Bhrajak, Ranjak, Alochaka and Sadhak).^[11]

Bhavamishra has followed Acharya Charaka and Vagbhata.^[12]

Agni has been divided into 13 types according to the function and site of action.

1. Jatharagni - One Agni present in the stomach and duodenum.
2. Bhutagni - Five Agni from five basic elements.
3. Dhatvagni - Seven Agni present, one in each of the seven dhatus.

Accordingly, they are classified into three groups, namely Jatharagni, Bhutagni and Dhatvagni.

a. Jatharagni

Jatharagni is the Agni or bioenergy present in the Jathara (stomach and duodenum). According to Ashtanga Hridaya, Jatharagni, the seat is grahani (duodenum), so called because it withholds the food for a certain time inside the Amasaya (stomach) to facilitate digestion. In the opinion of Dhanvantari, it is the Kala known as "Pittadhara," situated at the entrance of the Pakvashaya (intestine) and acting as a bolt to the door of the pathway/channel of food. It is responsible for the duration of life, health, valour, ojas (essence of the dhatus), strength of all the bhutagni and dhatvagni. The strength of the grahani is from Agni itself, and the strength of Agni is from grahani. When the Agni undergoes vitiation, grahani also gets vitiated and produces diseases.^[13] Jatharagni is considered to be the most important because each and every nutrient that one ingests first comes to the Jathara and is subjected to the action of Jatharagni. Jatharagni digests the food materials that consist of the five basic elements and transforms it for utilization by the respective Dhatus paramanus (tissues). It is also responsible for separation of the food material into the essence portion (Prasad) and the waste products (kitta) in our body.^[14]

Jatharagni is directly related to Dhatvagni or bio-energy in the cells and their metabolic processes, with ultimate tissue metabolism or Dhātu-Paka process. All the Dhatvagni depend on the normal, healthy state of Jatharagni. If the Jatharagni is hyperactive (Tikshna) or hypoactive (Manda), it will cause an excessive or retarded action of the Dhatvagni. This disturbed action ultimately leads to various disorders. Jatharagni is the main important Agni that controls the function of all

other 12 Agnis. All the Agnis are totally dependent on the status of Jatharagni.^[15]

Jatharagni is also classified into four categories according to its performance of Kapha are higher than normal, the condition is known as Mandgni.

b. Bhutagni

Bhutagni is the one that is present in a basic element (Bhutas). There are five Agnis in each of the five basic elements, namely – Parthiva (earth), Apya (water), Tejas (Agni), Vayavya (vayu) and Nabhasa (akash). Each and every cell in our body is composed of the five mahabhutas or five basic elements. Naturally, each cell (dhatu paramanu) consists of these five Bhutagni also. All the nutrients in this world that we eat also consist of the same five basic elements with their respective Agni or bioenergy. Thus, they are completely similar with respect to the five basic elements with their Bhutagni in our body cells as well in the entire outside nutrient that we ingest for the nutrition of our body. Acharya Charak has mentioned that the five Bhutagni digest their own part of the element present in the food materials. After the digestion of food by the Bhutagni, digested materials containing the elements and qualities similar to each bhutas nourish their own specific bhautika elements of the body.^[17] These Bhutagnis act after the Jatharagni present in the stomach and duodenum, acting on the food and causing their disintegration. In the modern physiological perspective, the action of Jatharagni can be equated with the digestion in the stomach and duodenum, and the action of the Bhutagni can be equated with the conversion of digested materials in the liver.

c. Dhatvagni

All the seven Dhatus (seven element tissues of the body) contain their own Agni to metabolize the nutrient materials supplied to them through their own Srotas.

- Rasagni present in the Rasa Dhatu.
- Raktagni present in the Rakta Dhatu.
- Mamsagni present in the Mamsa Dhatu.
- Medagni present in the Meda Dhatu.
- Asthyagni present in the Asthi Dhatu.
- Majjagni present in the Majja Dhatu.
- Shukragni present in the Shukra Dhatu.

Each Dhatvagni or the bioenergy present in each Dhatu synthesizes and transforms the essential Rasa Dhatu required for that particular Dhatu or cell from the basic nutrients present in the Anna Rasa or essence of the diet that we consume. Each Dhatvagni has got a speciality to synthesize and transform the constituents suitable to its particular Dhatu. This action is a sort of selective action. Acharya Charaka has mentioned the fact that that the seven dhatus that are a support of the body contain their own Agni, and by their own Agni they digest and transform the materials supplied to them to make the substances alike to them for assimilation and nourishment.^[18]

Importance of Jatharagni

Functions of various agni elaborately discussed above in which jatharagni is the chief among all types of agnis because function of bhutagni and dhatvagni depends on this. Aggravation or diminution of jatharagni results in aggravation or diminution of bhutagni and dhatvagni. Therefore by all means one has to protect jatharagni by consuming suitable wholesome dietetics and behaviour because longevity and strength depends on normal state of agni. On the contrary one, who consumes unwholesome diet due to greed, succumbs to disease caused by the vitiation of grahani.^[19]

Physiological and Pathological State of Agni.^[20-23]

1. Samagni

First variety is not associated with dosa and it is called samagni state and it is the physiological state of agni. The Samagni digests and assimilates food properly at the proper time. This thus increases the quality of the Dhatus (supportive tissues of the body). Persons having Samagni are always hale and healthy.

2. Vishamagni

Visamagni is the state in which improper digestion and metabolism takes place i.e. sometimes performs normal functions followed by abnormal one and manifest flatulence, abdominal pain, upward movement of vata inside the kostha, diarrhea, and heaviness in abdomen, intestinal gurgling and straining exercise for evacuation of stools. When this Agni is affected by the Vata Dosha, it creates different types of vatavyadhi.

3. Tikshnagni

Tikshnagni means very quick/very sharp/very fast. Tikshnagni is a state of very quick digestion of food, regardless of the type of food. Acharya Shushrut states that when the power of digestion is increased from normal to above normal, food digests very quickly and produces hunger or the desire for food. When food is digested, the throat, the mouth cavity and the lips become dry with a burning sensation. This condition is known as “Bhasmak Roga” according to Ayurveda. Tiksnagni state gives rise to manifestation of vatavyadhi.

4. Mandagni

“Mand” means slow. The meaning of the Mandagni is slow digestive power or digestive capacity. Those who are having Mandagni eat very little and are unable to digest the smallest amount of food. Dhanvantri says that Agni digests the least amount of food in the greatest amount of time and manifest heaviness in abdomen and head, cough, dyspnea, excessive salivation, vomiting and weakness of the body. Mandagni state gives rise to manifestation of kaphaja vikara.

CONCLUSION

Agni is the unique contribution of Ayurveda. Treatment of diseases is mainly based on proper understanding basics of Dosha Vitiation, Samprapti of disease, Shaman and Shodhana. Avastha of disease should be keenly observed and treatment plan should be designed accordingly. Imbalance in the body is created due to

disturbance in Agni. Jatharagni and Dhatvagni play a crucial role in the body. Nature of Agni, types of agni, Mandagni and its effects on body should be known to every physician for successful treatment of the diseases.

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