

Acharya Vagbhatta and Astanga Hridayam

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Introduction

Acharya Vagbhatta is one of the principal contributors to Ayurveda. He is famous for authoring the medical treatise, Ashtanga Sangraha and Ashtanga Hridayam. Ashtanga Hridayam (Heart of Medicine) is written in poetic language while Ashtanga Sangraha (Compendium of Medicine) is a longer and prolix work. In the time line, Ashtanga Sangraha is placed in the first half of 7th century by historians while Ashtanga Hridayam is considered to be a work of second half of 7th century. Vagbhatta was the disciple of Avalokita, who was the chief monk of Mahayana Buddhism. Historians believe that Vagbhatta was born in Sind (today in Pakistan), in a Hindu Brahmin family but in the later part of his life he embraced Buddhism.

In a verse Vagbhatta himself says, ‘By churning the great ocean of medical science, a great store of nectar by name Ashtanga Sangraha was obtained. From that store of nectar has arisen Ashtanga Hridaya for the benefit of less intelligent people’. This shows that Vagbhatta has taken excerpts and material from the pre-existing Ayurvedic treatises and has given it another shape, easier one. He simplified Ashtanga Sangraha and wrote Ashtanga Hridaya. Ashtanga Hridayam presented Ayurveda and its essence in an easy, simple, comprehensive and understandable way. It comprises 6 sections, 120 chapters and 7120 easily understood sanskrit verses.

Acharya Vagbhatta: A Buddhist Monk

The main proponents of Ayurveda during ancient times are – Acharya Sushruta, one the earliest surgeons; Acharya Charaka, a medical genius; and Acharya Vagbhatta. Together they are considered to be ‘The Trinity’ of Ayurvedic knowledge, with Vagbhatta coming after the other two. Acharya Vagbhatta was a great writer, physician and legend. According to historians, Vagbhatta belong to the region of river Sindhu. As per modern scholarship he was an ethnic Kashmiri, and for instance the German indologist Claus Vogel said "...judging by the fact that he expressly defines Andhra and Dravida as the names of two southern peoples or kingdoms and repeatedly mentions Kashmirian terms for particular plants, he is likely to have been a northerner and a native of Kashmir..." Vagbhatta was the son of Simhagupta. His grandfather was also known by the same name i.e. Vagbhatta. His father and grandfather, both were great Ayurvedic scholars. Vagbhatta is said to be the disciple of Avalokita – the chief monk of Mahayana

Buddhism. He was a vedic, as is shown by his explicit praise for the Shiva by name at the start of the Astang Sangraha, and his praise of the Shiva under the title "Unprecedented Teacher" in the opening verse of the Astang Hridaya. His work contains syncretic elements. Although Ashtanga Sangraha contains lot of references relating to Hinduism and Buddhism. This suggests that Vagbhata was born in a Hindu Brahmin family and in the later part of his life he adopted Buddhism as he makes a reference to Lord Buddha in his writings, and his sons, grandsons, and disciples were all Buddhists.

Vagbhata has authored two great treatises of Ayurveda namely 'Ashtanga Sangraha' and 'Ashtanga Hridaya'. Vagbhata is famous for having presented Ayurveda and its essence in an easy, simple, comprehensive and understandable way. Ashtanga Sangraha and Ashtanga Hridaya have glimpses of influence of Charaka Samhita and Sushruta Samhita. Ashtanga Hridaya is the easiest one among the two in terms of comprehensive understanding. The language used by Vagbhata is worth appreciating. It is reachable to almost everyone who reads it of course with a good knowledge of Sanskrit. It is believed that Vagbhata travelled extensively in Kerala, a state in South India, during his final years. He came in search of the medicinal plants and herbs that abound in Kerala's lush landscape. Vagbhata is said to be the founding force behind the tradition of Ashtavaidyas. These are selected families of physicians in Kerala who are skilled practitioners of all the eight branches of Ayurveda. The term is derived from 'astangavaidayan'... 'ashta' means eight, 'anga' means branch and 'vaidya' means physician. The ashtavaidyas of Kerala were inspired by Vagbhata to develop novel treatments.

In Ashtanga Sangraha, the name of the author was specifically mentioned as Vagbhata. But later commentators, Jejjata and Indu used the term 'Bahata' in place of Vagbhata. Bahata is a Prakrit variant of the term Vagbhata. So there lie no controversies. Both these terms denote the same person, Vagbhata. The author of a treatise 'Chikitsa Kalika', Acharya Tisata quotes that he is the son of 'Vagbhata' in the colophon at the end of the book. On the other hand, 'Chandrata', the son of 'Tisata' wrote commentary on 'Chikitsakalika', but has not mentioned Vagbhata in his book. Based on various evidences, present day scholars clarify the period of Tisata and Chandrata to be 10th and 11th century AD respectively. Hence it is difficult to believe, in fact impossible to believe that Tishata was the son and Chandrata was the grandson of Vagbhata. Nilamegha, in his work Tantrayukti Vichara has mentioned that both Jejjata and Indu were the disciples of Vagbhata.

Ashtanga Hridayam: An Epitome of Ayurveda

Astanga Hridayam - quintessence of the eight branches of Ayurveda, is one of the authoritative treatise on ancient Indian medicine. It had attracted the attention of medical fraternity not only within India but also of neighbouring countries such as Arabia, Persia, Tibet and Germany. Its popularity is substantiated by the large number of commentaries by Indian scholars and appreciation by the scholars of many other countries. With its beauty and brevity of poetical composition of precepts and practices of medical science and many other merits, it has earned its rightful place as one among the Brihatrayi. It is really an epitome of Ayurveda, catering the needs of the students, scholars and medical practitioners alike.

Astanga Hridayam presented Ayurveda and its essence in an easy, simple, comprehensive and understandable way. It comprises 6 sections, 120 chapters and 7120 easily understood sanskrit verses. At the beginning of the treatise, the author states, “he is going to describe only such information as has been revealed by sages like Atreya”; “collecting only the cream of knowledge from numerous texts (written by sages) scattered in the country”; “this text Astang Hridaya has been prepared which is neither too brief nor too elaborate.” These statement vouchsafe the authenticity and reliability of information contained in the text.

Sutra Sthana: The first section has 30 chapters, dealing with basic doctrine of Ayurveda, principal of health, prevention of diseases, properties of articles of diet and drugs, humoral physiology and pathology, different kinds of disease, and methods of treatment.

Sharira Sthana: The second section has 6 chapters, dealing with concepts and details of Ayurvedic embryology, anatomy, physiology, physical and psychological constitutions, auspicious and inauspicious dreams and omens, signs of bad prognosis and oncoming death.

Nidana Sthana: The third section with 16 chapters describe the cause, premonitory symptoms, characteristic features, pathogenesis and prognosis of some important diseases coming within the realm of Kaya Chikitsa.

Chikitsa Sthana: The fourth section has 22 chapters elaborating the methods of treatment of all major organic disease including efficacious medical recopies, diet and care of the patients. **Kalpa-**

Siddhi Sthana: The fifth section has 6 chapters dealing with formulations and methods pertaining to internal cleansing techniques known as purification therapies or Panchakarma - Vamana (therapeutic emesis), Virechana (therapeutic purgation), Basti (therapeutic enemas) and Nasya (nasal medication) along with management of complications and principals of pharmacy.

Uttara Sthana: The sixth and last section is devoted to the remaining seven branches of Ayurveda. It has 40 chapters in total; divided as 3 for Bala chikitsa (Paediatrics), 4 for Graha chikitsa (Demonology/Psychiatry), 17 for Urdhvang chikitsa (Diseases for organ in head) subdivided again 9 for Netra chikitsa (Ophthalmology), 2 for Karna chikitsa (Otology), 2 for

Nose chikitsa (Rhinology), 2 for Mukha chikitsa (Mouth, teeth and throat), and 2 for Shiro chikitsa (Diseases of head); Shalya chikitsa (Surgery) has 10 chapters; Damstra (Toxicology) has 4; Jara chikitsa (Rasayan/Rejuvenative therapy/Geriatrics) and Vajikaran (Aphrodisiacs) has one chapter.

A record 33 sanskrit commentaries has been written on Astang Hridayam, out of which Sarvang Sundara written by Arunadatta got wide acceptance. Ayurveda Rasayana commentary by Hemadri is also studied. Ashtanga Hridayam has been translated into many languages, including Tibetan (during the reign of king Khrison-dehu in 755-797 AD), Arabic (during the reign of Harun-al-Rashid 773-808 AD), Persian and several modern Indian and European languages (into German by Luise Hilgenberg and Willibald Kirfel in 1941).
