

Breast Cancer

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To gain a truly Ayurvedic perspective of breast cancer, we must first be willing to enter into the Vedic world view, a viewpoint vastly different from our modern, scientific picture of reality. The modern Western approach is linear, analytic, and deductive, whereas the Vedic approach is circular, synthetic, and inductive. Today, Ayurvedic treatment methods are subjected to rigorous clinical trials in order to produce satisfactory evidence for Western scientific minds. However, Ayurveda itself does not recognize the validity of statistics or sensory evidence (including instrumentation, however sophisticated). Since the conclusions drawn from scientific research are frequently discarded in light, of fresh research, these conclusions should, according to Ayurvedic philosophy, be regarded as speculation rather than truth. For real truth we turn to the unchanging Veda, and it is here that we will begin our exploration of breast cancer.

The Vedic view operates in concentric circles of meaning. Man and woman are microcosms of the macrocosm. The light of intelligence in the heart of a person is the same that shines in the sun (Isopanishad V16). All the gods, the great cosmic forces, reside within the body of a human. And the breasts of woman, our first source of nourishment in life, are replete with cosmic significance. We are nourished first by a human woman, our mother, then by a domesticated representative of Gay Ma, the cosmic cow, then by the fruit and grains provided by our beloved mother, Bhū Devi, the earth. Thus, all three, the cow, the earth, and woman, are held to be analogous, as witnessed by the fact that to kill a cow, without whose milk an entire family might starve, is considered equal to killing a woman, and much more serious than killing a man. Bhū Devi, our mother earth, is personified sometimes as a cow with groaning udders, but most often as a voluptuous woman with golden breasts. (Bhūmi Sukta, Atarvaveda, XIII 1). Once we pass infancy, she alone is the mother, the sustainer who gives us milk, and it is on her firm and heavy breasts that we dwell in safety and security all the days of our lives. For a healthy society, we must have fertile, healthy women, healthy cows, and a fertile, well-cared for earth.

Today, pollution, desertification, acid rain, oil slicks, strip mines, and nuclear test sites, wound the undulating beauty of Bhū Devi's golden breasts. Cows forced into cannibal diets spread mad cow disease into the human population. And, increasingly common throughout this century, women suffer with breast cancer. From the Ayurvedic viewpoint, a woman with breast cancer is not a statistic. Nor is she simply a patient, a mere human woman. She is the embodiment of Bhū Devi herself, and she bears us an important message.

Causes of Breast Cancer

Breast cancer is a *tridoshic* (involving all three body humors) disorder of breast tissue, sometimes preceded by fibrocystic breast disease, a *pitta-kapha* (*pitta* and *kapha* are each one of the three body humors) disorder. Causes are both hereditary and acquired; the acquired causes being physical, emotional, spiritual, and environmental.

Dietary and other physical factors can help to cause breast cancer, or to trigger the disease in one who already has the hereditary tendency. Breast cancer, like any malignant or degenerative disease, may be the result of prolonged wrong diet, wrong lifestyle, or *prajnaparadh* (crimes against wisdom). Wrong regimen leads first to accumulation of *doshas*, then in time to acute illnesses. If those illnesses are treated improperly, that is, if the excess *doshas* (the three body humors) are not expelled and *ama* (toxins) are not purified, then the imbalance is driven deeper, resulting in chronic complaints. If these chronic complaints in turn go untreated or are treated by suppressive methods without expelling *doshas* or cleansing *ama*, then the excess *doshas* will localize in the most toxic or most vulnerable tissue, in this case breast tissue, to create *sannipatika gulma*, a malignant tumor.

Thus the first message that the woman with breast cancer may be bringing is that we have lost touch with our bodies by indulging in a diet of refined, processed, artificially flavored, refrigerated, frozen, canned, or microwaved foods; overcoming fatigue with coffee and/or anxiety with alcohol or tranquilizers; and seeking a "quick fix" for acute illnesses rather than a slower healing process. We ignore our body's need for a diet and lifestyle similar to that of our ancestors. Perhaps breast cancer is the only message the body can give which will be loud enough to hear. The Vedic world view is a collective, not an individualistic one. The cancer of one woman does not speak to her alone, but is a timely message to each one of us to return to a simpler and more natural diet and lifestyle – the first step in cancer prevention.

Emotional Causes

The breasts are the organs of love, nurturance, and self-giving. Thus, breast cancer, on the emotional level, may arise as a metaphor for an inability to give and receive love and nurturing. Fundamentally, it is lack of self-love that is at issue. For example, the woman may have been raised in a family that placed the girls second to the boys, or in which stepsiblings treated her poorly, resulting in feelings of low self-esteem and even self-hatred. Unable to love herself, she later pursues and becomes desperately attached to men who are incapable of loving her, only to experience tremendous bitterness and resentment when they jilt and betray her. Nursing this resentment quite literally in her breast, she may then develop breast cancer. One woman with whom I worked was so badly afflicted by this cyclic lack of love that her only relationship was with her cat. Towards the end of her life she freely admitted, "Co-dependency kills. I am the proof of that."

The breast are also the symbol of the mother. Another significant cause of breast cancer may be hatred and resentment born towards a mother who was physically, emotionally, or sexually abusive and neglectful. In this case, the breast cancer comes as an opportunity to heal and resolve these long-stored toxic emotions.

Therefore, a second message that a woman with breast cancer brings to us as an emissary of Bhū Devi, our mother, is of the need to form loving, interdependent communities. The nucleus of such community may well form around the woman with breast cancer, as will be discussed later, the cancer itself evoking the very love and affection of whose lack it was a symbol.

Spiritual Causes

Meaninglessness and existential despair are the spiritual causes of breast cancer. Far deeper and more basic than a woman's need for the love of a man or another woman is her need of a more-than-human love. The breasts are closely connected with the *Anahata chakra* (the heart *chakra*) the seat of *bhakti* (devotion) and *prema* (divine love). "I know that True Person shining like the sun beyond the darkness. Only by knowing Him, one passes beyond death," says *Yajur Veda XXXI*, 18.

Unless or until we know that atman (self), the radiant person "smaller than a thumb" (*Katha Upanishad*, 111) and vaster than the universe who resides within our hearts, we live as the walking dead, a life of ultimate meaninglessness and despair. Nor will our soul tolerate for our full span of a hundred years this lack of truly living.

Eventually, in a last desperate effort to awaken us to our true nature and destiny, the soul presents us with the one God to whom we will listen – Yama, the God of Death, appearing in this case as a form of cancer. *Antaram mrtyor amritam* (*Satapatha Brahmana* 5,2, V4.), immortality dwells within death, and Yama, when he confronts us, says, as once he said to Naciketas, whose father offered him to death, "Arise, awake ... and be enlightened!" (*Katha Upanishad* 111 14)

The woman with breast cancer comes as a symptom of the profound soul-sickness of our times. She is a reminder to each one of us to cease serving profit, utility, and expediency, and to stop the constant gratification of transitory desires. She shows us, eloquently, that worldly pleasures turn in the end to pain. Bearing death in her body, as each of us mortals do, in fact, she reminds us to make use of this precious human birth in devotion and service to the One. Rediscovery of meaning is crucial in the prevention of breast cancer.

Environmental Causes

The above-mentioned causes still do not account for numerous happy, vegetarian, health food eating meditators who nonetheless develop breast cancer. Increasingly, the causation of breast cancer is passing out of the sphere of individual responsibility to the collective and societal level. With each decade, our soil, air, water, and entire food chain becomes increasingly polluted with known carcinogens. These include herbicides, pesticides, crude oil, dyes, industrial effluents, emissions, chlorinated hydrocarbons, such as DCE and TCE and other solvents; military waste, such as the nerve gases polluting Rocky Mountain Arsenal. Many of these items, being fat soluble, are readily stored in adipose tissue, which is abundant in the breasts. Use of agricultural hormones in raising livestock may also play a significant role in the etiology of hormone-dependent breast cancer. Radioactive pollution includes uranium tailings and emissions from both nuclear power plants, such as Three Mile Island, and nuclear testing sites, nuclear weapons factories, and the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. All of these installations produce carcinogenic and mutagenic waste.

It is at the environmental level that the woman with breast cancer brings her most urgent message as a representative of Bhū Devi; a multi-level message. She is each one of us, poisoned by the very substances with which we are polluting the earth. She is the entire human race, our capacity of love, nurturance, and self-giving affected by the cancer of greed, hatred, prejudice, possessiveness, and the self-serving attitude which have led us to rape, abuse and pollute our mother earth in the interest of short-term gains, profits, superficial appearances, and the maintenance of the status quo. Above all, she is Bhū Devi herself, her nurturing breasts afflicted with a cancer that threatens to sicken and kill our entire terrestrial home. And it is we, ourselves, who are the rogue cells in her body. As long as we consider ourselves as separate from the whole, struggling for survival over and against all other beings, caught in the consciousness of "I, me, mine," we have separated ourselves from the Wheel of Sacrifice in which all the children of Bhū Devi live. In fact, the primary function of Bhū Devi is to provide the altar on which human consciousness offers sacrifice to the Devas, the great cosmic intelligences, and to Prajapati, the primordial great-grandfather.

Earth exists as the milieu in which all the good things of the material plane are offered by humans in sacrifice to the creator. Robbed of her innate purpose by our failure to sacrifice, Bhū Devi has now sickened. The poisons that course through her veins and lymphatics, causing cancers and genetic mutations in her children, are the result of unrighteous sacrifice to greed and profit. The environmental pollution which poisons our earth and causes breast cancer in women is just a symptom of the mental pollution which has led us to expose ourselves, our children, and our earth to toxins for which we have no remedies. From the Ayurvedic standpoint, environmental pollution is best addressed by clearing the underlying mental pollution as well as by practical measures to clean the environment. Addressing environmental pollution is a most important long-term preventative measure for breast cancer.

Prevention and Treatment

In the second part of this article, we discuss an Ayurvedic protocol for the treatment of breast cancer that is designed to affect all four levels of causation (the physical, emotional, spiritual and environmental dimensions) in a systematic manner. For reasons both medicolegal and medicosocial, this treatment protocol is mainly employed as complimentary medicine rather than a sole or primary modality of treatment.

Medicolegally, Ayurveda is not a recognized form of treatment in this country, and we are obliged to recommend that anyone with a life-threatening illness consult a Western physician. Medicosocially, in this country we experience a shortage of highly expert Ayurvedic physicians and qualified Ayurvedic nurses, pharmacists, and cooks; difficulty obtaining the necessary herbs; the non-availability of Ayurvedic hospitals and nursing homes, and a lack of public awareness of the value of Ayurveda. Therefore, it is difficult to provide the level of excellence of care needed to treat such a serious condition. For these reasons, outside countries such as India and Nepal, where Ayurveda is part of the national healthcare system, we prefer to work in conjunction with a skilled surgeon.

The Care Team

Management of any cancer is a matter for more than simply a one-to-one therapeutic relationship. This treatment protocol is based on the formation of a care team, of whom the most important member is the woman with breast cancer. Well-informed and properly advised by her physicians, she makes the crucial decisions regarding her care and her treatment options.

As mentioned above, an experienced and compassionate allopathic surgeon is usually an essential member of the team. The Ayurvedic physician on the team serves the patient through education, recommending diet, herbs and lifestyle changes, and by opening up the possibilities for treatment on all four levels. The Ayurvedic lifestyle counselor provides detailed instruction on such matters as the preparation of Ayurvedic foods. Other team members include family and friends, who may be called upon to provide personal care post-operatively or if the cancer is more advanced. In addition, the team may include people who are not yet acquainted with the patient, but who are willing to participate with her on the spiritual and environmental level of her healing.

On the Physical Level

Treatments addressing the physical level include diet, herbs, and breast massage. The overall treatment approach includes detoxifying breast tissue, balancing the doshas, detoxifying the liver, and rejuvenation. Usually in Ayurvedic treatment, rejuvenation is the last step, following cleansing of tissues and pacifying of doshas. However, in the case of cancer, Ayurvedic treatment is frequently sought only after other methods have proven ineffective. By this time, the woman with breast cancer has usually tried many

excessive methods of detoxification and is often exhausted and depleted. Frequently she requires a careful balance of gentle and slow *stanya shodhan* (detoxification and purification of breast tissue) with rejuvenate and restorative herbs and diet.

Breast Massage

Breast massage is essential in the prevention and treatment of breast cancer. Indeed, daily breast massage should form an essential part of any woman's daily routine, just like brushing the teeth, or combing the hair. Daily breast massage familiarizes the woman with the normal contour of her breasts, rendering any lump or irregularities easier to detect. Even more important, massaging from the midline towards the axillary lymph nodes promotes more effective lymphatic drainage of the breasts, prevents stagnation, and notifies and energizes the breasts and the whole body. Tender, swollen breasts can be massaged with coconut oil, whilst castor oil can be used for a more cleansing effect. In cases of fibrocystic breast disease, pre-cancerous breast lumps, or breast cancer, the breasts can be massaged with *Vacha* oil (*Acorus calamus*), an important herb in the *stanya shodhan* category.

To obtain the full benefits of breast massage, it is essential that only pure cotton or silk be worn. No artificial fibers should be in contact with the breasts, as these tend to disrupt the normal flow of energy. Above all, wire-framed brassieres should be avoided due to the disruptive effect of metal on the *nadis* (energy channels).

Diet

Cancer is a *tridoshic* disturbance, therefore, it is not usually helpful to follow a specific diet for one *dosha*. Instead, a general Ayurvedic diet should be followed. Extremes of pungent, bitter, salty, sweet, or sour food, leftovers, fried food, and cold food and drink should be avoided. Proper food combining should be practiced, and there should be three to five hours between meals or snacks. *Khichari*, a combination of basmati rice and mung dal, is an ideal staple, since it cleanses all three *doshas* and nourishes all seven *dhatu*s. During chemotherapy or radiation treatments, a very strict *pitta*-pacifying diet should be followed, since both these treatments are extremely provoking to *pitta*.

On the Emotional Level

Ayurveda recognizes the profound healing power of emotional awareness. Drastic catharsis of emotions is not recommended, since this may temporarily weaken the body and allow the cancer to spread more effectively. Rather, deep-seated grief, anger, and resentment should be approached gently, compassionately, and with acceptance. In the Ayurvedic approach, it is not always necessary to express the emotions, but rather, to bring the light of awareness to bear on the emotion and allow the feeling to be experienced without either clinging to it or pushing it away. In the case of breast cancer, specifically, it is important to develop the capacity for self-love and self-nurturance. This is done in two stages – gently and compassionately facing our lack of self-love, and opening the heart to love oneself

At my clinic, the Alandi Ayurvedic Clinic in Boulder, Colorado, loneliness and alienation are met with the support of a loving community. In creating a caring community focused around a woman with breast cancer, we have noticed that there is profound emotional healing on the part of the affected woman, who is experiencing unconditional support and acceptance. Even if the cancer is not curable, the emotional wounds that caused it can be healed. At the same time, the other members of the healing group discover new levels of community and support. The woman with cancer acts as a healer for society, creating the loving and supportive community who's lack was one of the causes of her cancer.

On the Spiritual Level

Ayurveda seeks to heal loss of meaning and existential despair by restoring the sense of oneness with the self, *atman*, our true identity. Indeed, the whole purpose of Ayurveda is the rediscovery of our own true nature. Innumerable techniques of meditation have been developed to this end, any one of which, if practiced gently and without the intention of getting somewhere, will be beneficial in the healing of breast cancer.

At Alandi Ayurvedic Clinic, we work specifically with the healing *mantra*, *Mahamrtanjaya mantra*, one of the most ancient and revered of the Vedic *mantras*, second only to *Gayatri mantra* in importance. The effect of uttering the syllables of *Mahamrtanjaya mantra* destroys all physical, emotional, and mental poisons, cures even incurable illness, and eradicates the fear of death. The fear of death is the greatest fear, lying at the root of all other fears; from this basic lust for physical survival originate other mental poisons, such as greed, anger, and hatred.

Ultimately, all the toxins we store in our bodies and all the poisons with which we pollute our environment arise from this mental pollution. Thus, *Mahamrtanjaya mantra* has a profound healing effect on the one who chants it, the one who hears it, the one whose behalf it is repeated, and on the natural environment. It is recommended that patients with breast cancer repeat this *mantra* themselves at home and attend a weekly healing group where they can lie in *savasana* (full relaxation) during the chanting of this *mantra*.

On the Environmental Level

"From food come living beings; from rain comes food, from sacrifice comes rain" (*Bhagavad-Gita* III, 14). "By this do you nourish the cosmic intelligences, and they in turn nourish you. Thus nourishing each other, you shall reach the highest good." (*Bhagavad-Gita* III, 12). In the Vedic system, environmental healing and the maintenance of humanity's connection to and co-creation with the natural world takes place through *Yajna* (fire sacrifice). Today more than ever, Vedic fire sacrifice is a powerful tool for restoring our lost connection with the earth and the intelligences of nature. By chanting *Mahamrtanjaya mantra* whilst offering *ghee* into a cow dung fire in a copper pyramid, healing energies are generated which are traditionally said to be a thousand times

greater than those created by simply chanting the *mantra*. In our healing groups for women with breast cancer (useful also for other cancers, AIDS, psychosis, and many illnesses), *Mahamrtanjaya homa* (fire ceremony) is performed indoors in the homatherapy room, with group chanting of the *mantra*, whilst the patient lies with her head East, to the North of the fire. In this way, the emotional, spiritual, and environmental levels of the individual and the environment are simultaneously addressed in a group effort to generate subtle healing energies. Whilst this form of homatherapy is useful for almost any disease, a unique power is experienced when a woman with breast cancer is present, because of the identity seen in the Vedic world view between the breasts of women and Bhū Devi, the earth.

Conclusions

When Ayurvedic treatment is initiated immediately after the carcinoma is diagnosed, there is the greatest chance of promoting a full remission. However, even in this desirable outcome, there is a danger. Feeling herself cured, the patient may slip back into her former habits of diet and lifestyle, resulting in a recurrence of the cancer. Ayurvedic treatment as outlined in this article should be continued until the cancer is in full remission and the pulse shows no further sign of *tridoshic* provocation. At this point, a full program of *panchakarma* and *rasayana* (cleansing and rejuvenation) should be undertaken. *Panchakarma* is not be advisable during the active phase of the cancer, due to the strenuous nature of this treatment. The physician must strongly encourage the patient to leave behind her bad habits and to continue Ayurvedic diet and lifestyle permanently, to avoid recurrence.

If Ayurvedic treatment is initiated only after the disease has reached an advanced stage, or when the body has been weakened by chemotherapy, the chances of obtaining complete remission are slim. However, Ayurvedic diet and herbs can and should be used, with the intent to enhance the quality of life and well-being of the patient. The emotional, spiritual, and environmental levels of treatment continue to be extremely important even when the disease is in the terminal stage, for, although physical recovery may not be possible, healing will continue to occur on these levels.

Mahamrtanjaya mantra and homatherapy on behalf of the patient should be continued for a minimum of forty days after her death. According to the teachings of Ayurveda, physical death in no way concludes or curtails the evolutionary Journey of *jivatman*, the individual soul, towards full realization of its essential and unbroken identity with *paramatman*, the supreme Self.

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