

**“This is Not Ayurveda”**

***New Age Ayurveda* in the context of Ayurveda’s Globalization: between labeling and reinvention**

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*New Age Ayurveda* is the concept used in many academic and popular literatures to talk about the globalization of the Indian medical tradition beyond the Asian borders, particularly referring to the western practices of Ayurveda. In this sense the modern –now also postmodern- and global practices of Ayurveda are presented as the most *problematic* and *misunderstood* versions of contemporary Ayurveda, because of the change, adaptation and update processes they imply. In the context of global interchanges and spread of dynamic medical systems, the question about what practices and interpretations are considered western misunderstandings of Ayurveda and which could be considered western much legitimate re-interpretation of this medical knowledge is not only an question about what Ayurveda is or is not: it is also a political issue related, for example, to the practice of medical pluralism and to the manipulation of diversity either as an exotic consume product or as representation of the risks of too much creativity in the intercultural interchanges. This is why a discussion about the concept of *New Age Ayurveda* is necessary to reveal the scope of such a label and to define a conceptual framework to debate about the opportunities and challenges of global practices of Ayurveda.

Despite of the long and complex history of Ayurveda as a healing discipline and the different influences it has incorporated during its evolution, the literature agree that it is an a indigenous medical system which history has developed in and from the Indian space (Chopra 2003; Meulenbeld 1995; Smith and Wujastyk 2008; Zysk 2001). About the evolution of Ayurveda during the last century, Smith and Wujastyk (2008: 1) summarize it considering that it has faced three mayor challenges: first, the British colonialism and the dominance of allopathic medicine; second, the pressures of modernization; and third, Ayurveda’s diaspora into the World beyond the boundaries of South Asia. This diaspora, accelerated during the last four decades, is a recent and significant development of Ayurveda in the non-Indian

space, what Zysk identifies as a completely new phase in Indian Medical History (2001: 11). In this context, Smith and Wujastyk (2008: 2-3) propose to make a distinction between *Modern Ayurveda* and *Global Ayurveda*. The first corresponds to the evolution of Ayurveda inside the space of the Indian subcontinent, including the processes of professionalization, institutionalization and secularization of Ayurvedic knowledge, as well as the local forms of its adaptation to modernity and biomedicine. On the other hand, Global Ayurveda refers to knowledge that has been transmitted to geographically widespread areas outside of India, with different developments or *lineages*, as the authors call them. Smith and Wujastyk present these lineages as the mainstreams in which Ayurveda is being updated and reinterpreted in the non-Indian spaces.

*New Age Ayurveda* is the name given to one of these lineages in which Global Ayurveda has been interpreted in the West.<sup>1</sup> To understand the meaning and implication of this label it is helpful first to revise the definition of what is understood by *New Age*, an adjective widely used but scarcely defined. If we look to one of the most diffused definitions the name *New Age* refers to the arrival of the Astrological Age of Aquarius during the last decades of the twentieth century, and in general terms corresponds to a western social and spiritual movement, originated in the United States, related to different forms of holism and characterized by an individual approach to spiritual practices and philosophies. It includes aspects of different spiritual references –such as esotericism, atheism, pantheism and astrology- which can combine with references to the major world religions- Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Chinese, Islam, Judaism-; and with knowledge coming from scientific disciplines re-interpreted in a much integrative way, such as ecology, environmentalism, physics, psychology, and Gaia hypothesis. The Mind-Body-Spirit approach appears as central in the comprehension of the practices and applications of such ideas ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Age](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Age)).

In academic literature about modern practice of Ayurveda written during the last two decades, the so-called *New Age Ayurveda* is used in critical terms to refer to western acculturation and misunderstanding of the Ayurvedic knowledge and practice. Though Francis Zimmermann (1992) is one of the earliest authors to criticize what was a gentle and

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<sup>1</sup> The other three lineages or paradigms of Global Ayurveda are Ayurveda as mind-body medicine; Maharishi Ayur-Veda and the practices of traditional Ayurveda in western urban world (op.cit. p. 11)

partial version of Ayurveda offered for wellbeing seekers both in the West and in India, in the commented article he prefers to use the concept *Flower Power Ayurveda* to strength the idea of non-violence present in the commercial advertisement of Ayurvedic treatments, which he is discussing because the partial version of Ayurveda they give. He also highlights the projection of western self-criticism to modernity as a central point to approach to the ideas that support the *Flower Power* appropriation of Ayurveda as an idealized alternative to modern lifestyle's aspects.

Who does clearly use the *New Age* concept to criticize the western re-interpretations of Ayurveda, is Kenneth Zysk: in his article of 2001 he assimilates *New Age Ayurveda* to the whole development of Ayurveda in the West, referring it to the *New Age* movement as a western phenomena related to a critical posture against the modern western life, the idea of arrival of a new epoch in the human history, philosophical eclecticism, and, in the field of health, related to the holistic medicine, as critic to modern medicine (2001: 11-12). He uses the concept in a broad way, quite similar to the *Wikipedia* definition. Later, Smith and Wujastyk (2008) identify different branches in which Ayurveda has spread in North America and Europe and from there, back to India. Beside the authors already mentioned many other scholars use the term *New Age Ayurveda* in a much partial and delimited way, to highlight particular aspects of the western re-interpretations of the Indian medical tradition. For example Ananda Chopra uses the term to refer to the much philosophical western readings of Ayurveda in opposition to the older tradition which tend to be much religiously neutral (2003: 5); and Joseph Alter refers to the concept *New Age* relating it to holism (2008: xi); confusion between materialism and magic (2008: 21), also as reactive to "(...) the evil that civilization as such has wrought" (2008: xiv) and spread in the West through "pulp non fiction" publications (2008: xix). Alter refers much to *New Age* in Yoga, making direct reference to the mixing between Yoga and Ayurveda, as an example of it (2008: xiv). In the diversity of the definitions described here, the common factor is the use of the concept *New Age Ayurveda* to refer to practices and ideas that are in one way or another re-inventions of Ayurveda, related to Western issues being incorporated – or searched- in the Ayurvedic tradition. The common tone is of wake-up-call, highlighting misunderstandings and malpractices related to this spread (Alter 2008; Chopra 2003; Zimmermann 1992).

Smith and Wujastyk (2008: 17-19) identify the 1980s' as the moment when Ayurveda began to spread in the West from the hand of Ayurvedic practitioners' publications, such as Vasand Lad's *Ayurveda: The Science of Self-healing* from 1984, which is the first attempt to introduce the basic principles of Ayurveda to largely western nonmedical readers. In alarm tone, Zysk identifies this release of knowledge as one of the much critical points of Lad's work. In the field of health, the authors agree that it is possible to trace the relation between the search of the *New Age Movement* for medicines including the mind-body-spirit approach, called in general *holistic medicine*, and the emergence of Ayurveda in the western public knowledge, presenting to western audience a complete medical system that works with an approach different to the allopathic dualism and invasive methods of modern medicine (Wujastyk 2008; Zimmermann 1992; Zysk 2001). This move spread health practices out of the clinic and medical field, and put it at disposal of a wide range of citizens and organization. The process has been accelerated during the last two decades by the increase and diversification of publications, as well as of wellbeing centers using ayurvedic practices.

While Zysk asserts that all the development of Ayurveda in the West falls in the categories of *New Age Ayurveda* and is, in this sense, all the same acculturation and misunderstanding, Smith and Wujastyk (2008: 11) identify four different paradigms in Global Ayurveda: *New Age Ayurveda*; *Ayurveda as a mind-body medicine*; *Maharishi Ayur-Ved*; and *Traditional Ayurveda in an urban world*. From their perspective, the landscape of western practice of Ayurveda is much complex and it each mainstream has to be analyze in a particular way. What Smith and Wujastyk relate much directly to *New Age Ayurveda* is the association of Ayurveda to an alternative living paradigm, instead of an alternative medical system, and promoting it as such in advertisements easily and clearly target to costumers of everything that is alternative to the impersonal modern lifestyle. This makes a difference, for example, with the much medical *Ayurveda as a Mind-Body Medicine*, which intention is to translate and demonstrate the transitivity between ancient Ayurvedic medical knowledge and recent scientific discoveries, in relation to the mind-body unity in disease process (2008: 11-13).

Zysk, when identifying the Western spread of Ayurveda as *New Age Ayurveda*, defines its general characteristics as follow:

1. "attributing a remote age to Ayurveda and making it the source of other medical system

2. linking Ayurveda closely to Indian spirituality, especially Yoga
3. making Ayurveda the basis of mind-body medicine
4. claiming the ‘scientific’ basis of Ayurveda and its intrinsic safety as a healing modality.” (2001: 13)

Later, Smith and Wujastyk (2008: 2) focus the definition of *New Age Ayurveda* as an acculturated reinterpretation of the Ayurvedic practice and theory, which reinforces, if not *reinvent*, the spiritual and philosophical aspects to Ayurveda and makes part of the criticism to modern western approach to health, promoting a shift from a reactive medicine to a much preventive and positive lifestyle discipline. The Mind-body approach put by Zysk as example of *New Age Ayurveda*, is for Smith and Wujastyk a completely different western lineage.

The spread of Ayurveda in Western space is a fact demonstrated by the presence of practitioners, training and treatment centers, as well as by the numerous scholar and non-scholar publications related to Ayurveda in formats as wide as newsletters, Internet and books. This leads to re-interpretations of the Ayurvedic tradition that include western cultures and environments in a dynamic historical process that can be traced thanks to its wide diffusion. For example, representatives of Ayurveda in North America, such as Vasand Lad or Robert Svoboda, are constantly evolving in their handle of Ayurveda theory and practice. They were mentioned by Zysk as representatives of the *New Age Ayurveda* because of their too wide and personal presentation of Ayurveda to a popular western public (2001: 13-18); but later Smith and Wujastyk (2008: 18-22) identify Lad as a representative of the *Mind-Body Ayurveda* approach, partly related to his 2002 book *Textbook of Ayurveda: Fundamental Principles* where he shifts from the popular to the scholar readers trying to reformulate Ayurveda in terms of western categories (Smith & Wujastyk 2008: 22). And Svoboda was invited to be part of their scholar anthology with an article called *The Ayurveda Diaspora: A Personal Account*.

The so-called *New Age* form of Ayurveda has been also re-imported to India in the form of “wellness” tourism for both foreign tourist and middle-class Indians (Smith & Wujastyk 2008: 2-3), associated to global tourism market as well as to transformations of the local access to the traditional medicine. This leads to a central critical point of *New Age Ayurveda*, which is the paradox between the spiritual and anti-materialistic perspective it

suppose to improve in the individual (as critique to the modern western lifestyle), and the highly materialistic and commercialized form in which Ayurveda has been appropriated as a luxurious way to consume wellbeing through one-to-three-day-workshops, spas, or beauty massages (Smith and Wujastyk 2008; Zimmermann 1992). It relates the discussion to the commercial manipulation in frivolous and partial presentations of a healing tradition. For example advertisements of Ayurveda therapeutic practices as complex as *Panchakarma* are usually presented in a publicity language that shows it much as another fast consume good in the global alternative and wellbeing market, related to an exotic eastern practice, than as a medical knowledge and practice with non-modern approach to life and health (Smith and Wujastyk 2008: 3, 12; Zyck 2001: 15; Zimmermann 1995: 21-29). Other important discussion point which Zimmermann develops in his 1995s' article, is much epistemological: when talking about *Flower Power Ayurveda* he stresses how the pure and gentle images of Ayurveda are exaggerated, erasing fundamental parts of the traditional therapeutics such as the more aggressive and invasive steps of *Panchakarma*, and in this sense re-creating the whole theory and practice according to western projections and not to the Indian roots (1995: 213).

Finally, in relation to the problem of imposing western values over the Ayurvedic practice and Explanatory Model, the main problem seems to be the appropriation of Ayurvedic practice by the modern western dualism and mercantilism. Zimmermann criticizes the projection of the dualism “pure and gentle v/s impure and violent” on Ayurveda – particularly in the *Panchakarma* advertisement- and the creation of a selling product that offers wellbeing and rejuvenation to the western purity seekers (1992: 213-214) instead of assuming *Panchakarma* as the complex and intense therapy it is. Smith and Wujastyk (2008: 12-13) criticize the massive advertisement of Ayurveda as an alternative to modern western ills by using the modern marketing techniques of simplification and magnification: as an exotic solution for the modern lifestyle. In this sense the critique to mercantilism and dualism in *New Age Ayurveda* should be analyze much as a Western self-critique than as a critique to the western re-interpretations of Asian healing traditions. The problem is not the cultural interchange or the emergence of syncretism in healing, the problem is the forms in which the difference, represented by a medicine alternative to western allopathic, is manipulated: either as consume good or as misunderstanding.

In Summary, between the many different forms in which global Ayurveda is developing, the so-called *New Age Ayurveda* was the concept initially used to warn about the Western re-interpretations of the Ayurvedic practice and theory that appeared to be superficial and much related to the Western history, ideas and interests than to medical tradition of India. Today the concept as been replaced by much precise approaches that include a much dynamic perspective of culture and medicine, by recognizing the history of previous interchanges between east and west cultures (Saks 2008: 36), and recognizing the eclectic tradition inside Ayurveda itself, not only about the medical practice but also about issues like the attitude towards religion (Meulenbeld 1995: 2-3). Using the concepts proposed by Smith and Wujastyk (2008) of *Global Ayurveda*, referred to the many forms in which Ayurveda is spreading around the world, and *Modern Ayurveda*, related to the contemporary changes of Ayurveda as a Medical System in the Indian space, appear to be much precise and less tendentious than the New Age label. The contextualization of a critique analyze in the Global Ayurveda field allows a much historical and less ideological analyze of the processes already happening, tracing relations much then qualifying truthfulness. This is certainly much template than labeling every new re-interpretation as incorrect, in Zysk's way, and shifting away from dangerous ideological statement.

About Western re-interpretations of Ayurveda, the dynamic history of mixing with different cultures and being open and eclectic to different philosophical traditions shows that the co-existence in more or less relation to diverse non-medical ideas hasn't put in danger the continuity of Ayurveda as such. Nowadays the concern about reinterpretations is much related to the transformation of Ayurvedic practices in a consume trend. In this sense, the recent approach to *New Age Ayurveda* exposed in scholar literature is closer to a critical view over global marketing dynamics and instrumental manipulation of Ayurveda as a consume product in publishing, tourism, health and pharmaceutical markets. In this sense, the concern about reinterpretations of Ayurveda is part of a wider critical perspective to the superficial appropriation of diversity by advertisement designers and anxious seekers (and worse: in the encounter between both). As Zimmermann (1995) or Smith and Wujastyk (2008) show, these topics are actually more relevant then the question about what is and what is not a purist acceptable re-interpretation of Ayurveda.

A further question remains open in relation to the historical process occurring in the West in relation to how it deals with diversity and control inside its owns societies. Beside the

marketing manipulations and pharmaceutical industries, the citizens' approach to Ayurveda as healthy life-style practices could be an interesting object of inquiry by itself, as diversification of medical pluralism. For example Saks (2008) asks for the role of the citizens, as health consumers, in the control processes inside medical pluralism. On the other hand, the people wanting to decide how to be healed and even wanting to be preventive healers could be approached as a social changing process that stresses the body politics and the health management. Medical pluralism is not only found in the organization of the coexistence between institutionalized medical systems and pharmaceutical, it is also being re-created in the personal medical practices, enriching the popular practices of healing and preventing, which are not under the control of the official medical systems but in the people's decisions about their health and bodies. This is certainly a very fluid field, full of ambiguity and hybrids, which should generate much restlessness to the "social order" adepts. Maybe that is why it is so important for some people to stop this popularization of diversity, denouncing what is "not real Ayurveda".

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