

# Could you be suffering from Ama?

By Richard Clark

Ama is a word from the Sanskrit language, the language of the Vedas and early ayurvedic medical texts. It is a word we might nowadays translate as 'toxins', but it is both more elaborate and more subtle than the word toxins might suggest.

Do you frequently wake up feeling heavy, dull and tired? Experience stiff achey muscles, a coated tongue, chronic fatigue or digestive complaints? Chances are, you could be suffering from what is known in *ayurveda* (eye-ur-vayda), the sister science of yoga, as *ama* (ah-muh).

In this article we will take a closer look at the phenomenon of *ama*; how it affects us all in some way, and how it is a primary factor associated with states of ill-health and disease. We'll also investigate how we can, through ayurvedic and yogic recommendations, minimise the development and impact of *ama*, and in doing so, improve the quality of our life.

*Ama* is a word from the Sanskrit language, the language of the Vedas and early *ayurvedic* medical texts. It is a word we might nowadays translate as 'toxins', but it is both more elaborate and more subtle than the word toxins might suggest. Literally the word *ama* means 'unripened' or 'uncooked' and refers to any product that passes through our digestive system without being completely digested or 'cooked'. We've all heard of environmental toxins, but *ama* toxins are of our own making.

For us to better understand the concept of *ama*, it may be helpful to briefly examine some other fascinating subjects that yoga and ayurveda have to offer, such as *agni*, the five elements, *yagna* and *ojas*.

Understanding the digestive process is essential to our understanding *ama*, but this need not be a complicated study. Cooking is

an appropriate metaphor for the digestive process, because in ayurvedic and yogic sciences, the primal 'fire' element is seen to be the single most important factor in the breakdown and conversion (or cooking) of all food taken into the digestive system (cooking pot). It is the fire element that has the power to cause a change of state in any substance.

Everything we take in as food requires processing or 'cooking' in order to prepare and re-present that nourishment in a form acceptable to the cells of the body. The refined substances (chemical/energetic components of food) resulting from complete digestion become available for our growth, repair, energy, immunity, creativity and mental/emotional balance. Our daily choices regarding food intake influence our state of mind and our character and, as a point of interest, ayurveda and yoga further expand the concept of food to include everything we take in through the five senses. What we choose to watch, read, listen to, taste, touch, or breathe in, has the capacity to nourish us.

Let's take a closer look at the fire element known in Sanskrit as *agni* (ugh-nee) and how it relates to the digestive process and *ama*. Vedic sciences recognise that the earth and everything on it is constructed from combinations and permutations of five fundamental elements – ether, air, fire, water and earth. These elements exist in a range of states from the subtle to the gross. In their primary states, the five elements may be conceived more as codes or 'packets' of

intelligence. That is to say, that while physical fire, for example, is quite obvious, it is not the only manifestation of the fire element in the universe. On a more subtle energetic level, fire is a radiant principle which underlies all processes involving conversion and transformation. The fire element may be noted in any object or process displaying the characteristics of fire – light, heat, conversion and combustion.

Ayurveda acknowledges the importance of *agni* in so many vital psycho-physiological processes including skin colouration, eyesight, mental and physical digestion, courage, maintenance of body temperature, and intellectual ability. In our own digestive system, substances such as hydrochloric acid and other digestive enzymes carry the intelligence of the fire element. They are hot, sharp and penetrating by nature, just like the fire element (have you ever suffered heartburn?). These substances enable the cooking or conversion of gross food particles (broken down by chewing) into a more refined product termed '*ahara rasa*' in *ayurveda*.

The fire bio-energy present in the stomach and upper small intestine (*jathara* in Sanskrit) is known as the *jatharagni*. Ayurveda has revealed 13 different *agnis* in the human body, however *jatharagni* is the most important, as the other 12 are dependent upon it. In the outer world the sun is another locus of *agni*. There's an old saying, 'as in the macrocosm (outer environment) so in the microcosm (inner universe)'. The strength of the *jatharagni* will correspond with the solar *agni*, so as the sun reaches its zenith at midday, so too will the power of *jatharagni*. This is why its best to eat your main meal around midday.

Fire has been revered and viewed symbolically as the embodiment of transformative process, since ancient Vedic times. Fire transforms the gross into the subtle. The Vedas, the earliest extant spiritual works of humanity, speak of the fire ritual known as *yagna* (which can mean sacrifice). In the *yagna* ceremony, a sacrificial fire is constructed into which various offerings, often rice and ghee, are placed according to recommended guidelines. These substances are transmuted into refined essences by the fire. The symbolic use of the physical fire in *yagna* rituals represents the inner spiritual flame that we should ignite in order to become enlightened.

(*Agni*, incidentally, is considered to be the root of the English word 'ignite')

Ayurveda takes the view that whenever we partake of food we are performing an inner fire offering. The body's own elaborate inner fire is the *jatharagni*. Most of us perform about three inner fire rituals daily, but perhaps not always with the respect that a ritual deserves. Eating may be viewed as an offering into that digestive fire from which the altered or transformed products are sent to nourish each and every living cell of the body. In a sense, the food you consume is becoming you!

So, spare a moment to consider what may happen if things don't go quite right, If you have not followed the recommended guidelines for your fire ritual, if you've perhaps stuffed food in when you weren't even hungry (hunger is a sign of *agni's* activity), if you've eaten when you were emotionally distressed, or consumed a tempting but probably indigestible mess of sickly sweet items.

Complete balanced digestion is so important. It is said that if *agni* is strong, even ingested poison can be turned into nectar (please don't try this at home – just get the point!) and if *agni* is weak, even the best chemical free organic food can become a toxin in the body. This is because weakened *agni* cannot efficiently complete the digestive process, and the result of that unfortunate situation is 'half cooked' food or *ama*.

This *ama* is so insidious that even traditional Sanskrit synonyms for disease, such as '*amaya*', ring with its name. *Ama* is described as being a particularly sticky, heavy, turbid and foul-smelling substance. It has the tendency to accumulate in the gastro-intestinal tract and then overflow into the circulatory system, to eventually deposit into weak tissues around the body (for example joints, in the case of *ama*-induced arthritis). These tissues may be genetically weak, nutritionally deprived, have been damaged through injury or weakened by negative emotions. Once lodged in these sites, *ama* is well-placed to interrupt the functioning and status of the affected tissue. At that level of cellular interference, *ama* deprives the cells of nourishment and energy, and that's how we'll feel – dull, sluggish and tired all the time. Also, the body's waste products will take on the characteristics of *ama* – stools will become sticky and very

strong smelling, urine becomes odorous and cloudy, and perspiration (considered a waste product or '*malā*' in ayurveda) will also become particularly unpleasant in odour.

To lessen the likelihood of this chain of events occurring, we need to achieve complete digestion or processing of our food, through healthy balanced *agni*. The imagery of *agni* as digestive fire can help us become alert to many of the factors responsible for its imbalance: overeating will 'snuff out' the digestive fire, icy cold drinks will 'swamp it', skipping meals will cause the *agni* to 'rage uncontrolled', and emotions and irregular lifestyle will cause the fire to 'waver'. Each time, a little more *ama* is produced.

There's another good reason to avoid *ama* production in the body. *Ama* is the natural born enemy of '*ojas*', a refined energetic material that provides strength, immunity and longevity to our bodies. The previously mentioned '*ahara rasa*' which has been prepared from ingested food by the *jatharagni*, passes through a series of metabolic transformations in each of the body's seven *dhatus* or tissues. (*Ayurveda* explains that the body is comprised of seven primary tissues, each of which has its own *agni*). After the original *ahara rasa* has undergone processing in each of these tissues, the seventh tissue – *shukra* or reproductive tissue – prepares the ultra-refined *ojas*. *Ayurveda* regards *ojas* as the essential energy of the immune system. *Ojas* is present in all the body's tissues, but has a specific relationship with the heart. Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh has referred to this material as the '*prana of pranas*'.

Hatha yoga texts are replete with references to *agni*, *ama* (toxins), and *ojas*. In *ayurveda*, daily exercise, or '*vyayama*', is recommended. Yoga *asana* ranks high on the list for *vyayama*, as *asana* produces lightness in the body, increases digestive fire, gives strength and elasticity to the tissues and calms the mind. Moreover, yoga's emphasis on *yamas* and *niyamas* and *sattvic* lifestyle, greatly minimises the toxins which we may encounter on other levels.

One suggestion to yoga students, especially those who practise styles of hatha yoga involving heat, is to avoid guzzling a lot of water, especially cold water, during *asana* practise. The combination of yoga *asana* and heat can help to mobilise toxins; however, cold

water will dampen the *agni*, or heat, that arises with practice, and the toxins rather than being 'burned up' will travel and settle into other weak tissue sites.

### Why is it important to balance the agni (the digestive fire)?

- The nutrition required by all living cells is dependant on a balanced and complete digestive process.
- Imbalanced *agni* leaves an unprocessed residue which accumulates as toxic *ama*.
- Digestive abilities on all levels ('digestion' of all physical, sensory and mental experiences) rely on balanced *agni*.
- Production of *ojas* will be improved (*ojas* supports our immunity, strength and experience of bliss).
- This helps to maintain normal bodyweight for your body type.

### How can I tell if my agni is balanced?

#### SIGNS OF BALANCED AGNI

- You will experience normal appetite at mealtimes
- You will leave the table feeling comfortable, refreshed and energised with a feeling of satisfaction and no bloating or digestive distress
- You will produce well-formed faeces without strong smell
- You can eat all types of food without disturbances
- Your complexion will glow.

#### SIGNS OF IMBALANCED AGNI

- If *agni* is excessive there may be a raging appetite outside of mealtimes; if underactive there may be complete lack of interest in food.
- You might leave the table feeling heavy, lethargic, bloated, gassy, or with heartburn and belching
- Faeces will not be well-formed, will have foul odour, tend to stick to the bowl and possibly contain undigested food.
- Sensitivity to many foods, food intolerances and allergies.
- Dull complexion.

### Why did my agni become 'imbalanced'?

- Eating on the run, skipping meals
- Eating while emotionally upset
- Overconsumption of cold, liquid substances eg ice water

- Overeating, overconsumption of heavy and cold food late at night
- Not enough/too much exercise; under/overwork

#### What can I do to balance my agni?

See the guidelines for good digestion in Table 1.

#### Why do I need to be aware of ama?

*Ama* makes you dull, sluggish, easily fatigued, susceptible to colds and infections and smelly – no fun at all really! Still, the question may arise that "if the body has innate intelligence which directs self-healing, self-repairing and detoxifying mechanisms, what's all the fuss about *ama*? Surely the body is well-designed enough to deal with and eliminate *ama*?"

Well, perhaps, if only we'd get out of our own way! If, however, our *agni* remains strong and balanced through a regular diet appropriate to our body type, and balanced emotions and lifestyle, it can deal with and burn up a little *ama*. Oftentimes though, we may find we've reached a stage in life where we're suffering the effects of accumulated *ama*, and this takes more work to eliminate. Despite our best intentions, many modern food items typically consumed today are in themselves quite '*ama*-genic', devitalised and overprocessed.

The problem with *ama*, once it has arisen, is that due to its adhesive quality – its stickiness and propensity to accumulate – it tends to cause obstructions in the channels of communication in the body; (*srotas*) for example, blood vessels, nerves and intracellular channels. These obstructions hamper both the flow of intelligence and the body's natural healing mechanisms. *Ama* takes the zest out of life!

#### How can I tell if I'm already affected by ama?

Early signs and symptoms of *ama* production are a sticky coating on the tongue, offensive breath, strong body odour, loss of strength, indigestion, laziness, waking up feeling dull, heavy and nauseous, little desire for food, strong smelling, cloudy, urine.

Later signs and symptoms of *ama* may vary depending on the level, chronicity and site at which *ama* has accumulated. There may be chronic fatigue, poor memory, frequent colds and infections, abundant mucous, excess weight gain, skin eruptions, painful joints, allergies and food intolerances, and depression.

## Table 1 <guidelines for good digestion>

- Eat when you are hungry
- Select food that is fresh, lightly cooked, warm and easily digested. Salads are okay in summer if you're *agni* is balanced
- Eat in a relaxed congenial atmosphere
- Avoid unsuitable food combinations (see Table 2)
- Eat the main meal somewhere around midday as *agni* is stronger at that time
- Avoid large meals and heavy food late at night
- Rest your *agni* once a week; take only a light meal such as soup or broth or fruit
- Eat appetising food (tasteless meals won't stimulate your *agni* and may lead to incompletely digested food)
- Try chewing cardamom seeds or fennel seeds after meals; they help digestion and freshen the breath
- Sip ginger tea or fennel seed tea with meals
- Don't make food a religion – fanaticism and rigidity are not necessary. Food nourishes us and keeps us healthy, but it isn't the goal.

## Table 2 <unsuitable food combinations>

Ayurveda declares that certain combinations of foods make for accelerated *ama* production. Here are some examples of *foods* that should not be combined.

- Fish with dairy milk
- Milk or yoghurt with sour/acid fruits eg citrus, strawberries or tomatoes

- Milk with banana (say goodbye to the old banana smoothie)

Additionally, heating honey is considered to produce powerful *ama*, for example, honey in cakes and biscuits, muesli bars and stir fry sauces with honey. Therefore eat raw unprocessed honey.

#### Why am I suffering from ama?

Specifically, *ama* production is described as having arisen from either of, or a combination of, two factors. First, it could be due to diminished strength of your *agni*, perhaps from overwork, over-eating, excessive exercise, lack of exercise, eating on the run or eating when emotionally upset. Secondly, it could be due to unwise eating habits, especially the following.

- Eating when you're not hungry
- Eating when you're emotionally upset
- Eating unsuitable food combinations which accelerate *ama* production (see Table 2)
- Eating heavy cold food late at night; for example icecream or yoghurt
- Eating before the previous meal has been digested. You will know when the previous meal has been digested, because you will again experience the return of hunger and you will feel no bloating or digestive distress. Listen to your body!

#### What can I do about ama?

The best thing to do is avoid *ama* production in the first place! Achieve complete digestion

by following the guidelines for good digestion in Table 1. You should also:

- Avoid incompatible food combinations (see Table 2)
- Avoid overeating; the quantity and type of food eaten shouldn't overburden your *agni*.
- Minimise or eliminate canned, frozen, deep fried, left-over foods, fermented foods, ice-cold drinks, cheese and red meat.

Certain spices can assist your digestion and minimise *ama* production; learn to use them in food preparation – cardamom, fennel, ginger, hing (asafoetida), coriander, cumin seed and turmeric. Alternatively, at health food stores you can purchase ayurvedic churnas (prepared spice blends) specific to your body type and digestive requirements.

So, the good news is that there's plenty you can do about *ama*. A wide range of yogic practices have long been recommended to assist detoxification and balance or rekindle the *agni*. Each class of *asanas* – the forward bends, twists, backbends, inversions and balances – can have positive effects on the *agni*, though some more than others.

Swami Sivananda recommended, amongst others, *Sirsasana* (headstand) to "augment the *jatharagni*". The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* text has suggested the use of *Mayurasana* (peacock pose) and *Bhastrika pranayam* (the 'bellows breath') to remove toxins. Sri K Pattabhi Jois, in his *Yoga Mala* has recommended *Navasana* (boat pose) to "cure gastric trouble resulting from food not digesting completely... due to a lack of digestive fire", and *Paschimottanasana* (extreme forward bend) to "increase *jatharagni*". Swami Satyananda Saraswati has explained *agnisar kriya* as a particularly beneficial practice, and Sri BKS Iyengar, in *Light on Yoga* has mentioned *Mayurasana*, again as a posture which "improves digestive power... and prevents the accumulation of toxins due to faulty eating habits"; and *Uddiyana bandha* (abdominal lift) which "increases the gastric fire and eliminates toxins in the digestive tract."

Still others recommend the yogic cleansing system known as *shatkarma* or *shatkriya*. How to perform and sequence these practices should always be learned from an experienced and qualified yoga teacher.

You can also learn to increase *sattva* – the qualities of clarity, peace and love – in your world. Some ways to achieve this are: listen to uplifting music, read inspirational texts, enjoy nature, seek balance and spend time in reflection. When *sattva* is dominant in our minds and lives we tend to make more life-enhancing choices in all areas, with less toxic residues as a result.

Yoga and ayurveda are both sciences of awareness. Awareness is a great gift indeed. It helps to raise our consciousness from the mundane to the sublime. Becoming better tuned to your body, *prana*, *agni*, five senses, mind and emotions through regular yoga practice (*abhyasa*) is a great step toward developing this awareness.

We've all heard the adage "you are what you eat". Ayurveda adds "you are what you digest!". To apply these principles you don't need fancy equipment or advanced technical knowledge of digestive physiology. Being informed about *ama* shouldn't make you feel apprehensive, just more aware. Try digesting this information a couple of times and use it to your best advantage. It's a 'sure-fire' way to better health.

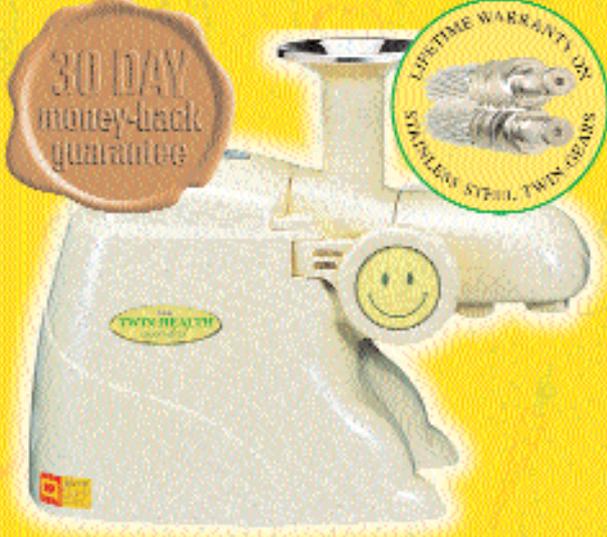
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