Pulse Reading: The Miraculous Art & Science of Diagnosis

“A vaidya (ayurvedic doctor) who does not know how to do pulse, urine, and tongue diagnosis cannot achieve success in the treatment, and can kill the patient.”

Yog Ratnakar

Amongst some of my vivid childhood memories are those of my grandfather, a vaidya (an ayurvedic doctor) at a village in Patan district of Gujarat state in Western India.

As a young girl then, I was intrigued by the snaking queues of villagers who would patiently wait outside our village home to just have their pulse ‘felt’ by my grandfather, reverently called vaidji by them.

My grandfather—who walks upright at 95 years now, has all his teeth intact, and doesn’t need the aid of glasses to read—would sit on his gaddi (a cotton mattress spread on the floor) and press his three fingers on the pulse of the patient close to the wrist and do nadi pariksha or pulse reading/diagnosis.

What is Pulse Diagnosis?

Pulse diagnosis is the ancient art and science of detecting the existing status of a person’s body, mind, soul and spirit. Nadi or pulse is that vital flow of energy or life that courses through as a subtle channel all over the body, and enables the vaidya to feel the way the blood spurts from the heart. This helps an experienced ayurvedic doctor to diagnose or treat various ailments, or to prevent their occurrence.

‘Ayurveda,’ which literally means the ‘Science of Life,’ has bestowed the miraculous science upon us of diagnosing the imbalances within our body, without the use of any instruments except fingers. I feel that several problems that remain undiagnosed even with the aid of sophisticated diagnostic tests can be accurately judged by examining the pulse.
Pulse Reading

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Pulse reading can be learnt through continuous practice, focus, awareness, and under the guidance of an experienced guru. It is like playing the veena, a musical instrument akin to the violin. On striking, each string produces a different musical note. Similarly, an expert pulse reader by touching, pressing, and 'feeling' the different combinations of the pulse, is able to diagnose the imbalances within a person's body.

Ayurveda states three barometers of diagnosis: darshana (see and observe), sparshana (touch), and prashna (inquire by asking questions). Successful pulse reading involves touching, feeling, observing, and experiencing not only the rate, rhythm, and volume of the pulse; but also its movement, amplitude, temperature, force, and consistency in the body.

The Vision Unfolds

Medicine flows in my veins. I grew up and completed my M.D. in both the modern and Ayurvedic systems of medicine. I began my career by practicing in the modern system of medicine, but soon realized that it did not tackle the root cause of the disease. Most of the times, my patients felt good initially, but came back a few months later with the problem recurring.

Six months later, I was seeing close to 100 patients in a day, diagnosing the problem, and treating them successfully with pulse reading technique which I learned from my dean Dr. Madhav Sane. It has been eleven years since then and today I well understand why there were those serpentine queues of patients at my grandfather’s house.

Basic Concept of Ayurveda

Before I share my practical experiences, I would like to state the basic concept of Ayurveda, which reiterates that all living beings are the permutation and combination of the five basic elements—space, ether, air, fire, and water. These five elements constitute the three major biological components—the three dosas.

The dosas are: vata (air + space), pitta (fire + water), and kapha (water + ether). Life and death on the earth is caused by nothing else but the balance and imbalance of these dosas. Health follows when the dosas are balanced and disease when they are imbalanced.

Another important factor for health or disease is agni or digestive fire that governs digestion and metabolism. For example, what happens when we cook rice on a very very slow fire, it is not cooked properly, and what happens if the fire is very high, the food is burnt? So, to prepare well-cooked rice, what is required? The answer is obvious, a medium or normal fire. In the same way, if our digestive fire is too low or too high, then the food we consume remains half digested and forms a sticky mucus-type toxic substance called aam in ayurveda.

The aam, in turn, gets into our bloodstream and obstructs channels within the body, which is the beginning of disease. If the problem is diagnosed on time, then it is easy to solve; but if it is not tackled and enough time is allowed to pass, the disease becomes chronic and incurable.

To understand the subtle nuances of pulse reading, it is important to know the above-mentioned basic tenets of Ayurveda. Pulse reading helps to diagnose the problem at the first stage, when the dosas and aam just begin to accumulate and much before they spread and vitiate the entire body; and manifest themselves in the form of disease that finally becomes chronic and complicated.

So, if a vaidya is able to do correct pulse reading before the disease progresses, disease can be reversed towards health.

Case Studies

In my long years of practice, I have successfully treated several patients of vata, pitta, and kapha.

Case Study 1 – Vata Pulse

Patient’s History

The patient, an overweight 55-year-old lady doctor, came for the treatment of obesity.

Diagnosis

On examining her pulse, I found that it was full of swelling and moving like a snake. The vata pulse was jumping more with low circulation, and it was difficult to feel.

I asked her if she had ever had an abortion, and she said twice. I then asked her if she had a caesarean, and she said yes. She went on to tell me how she had progressively started putting on weight after the operation.

To lose weight, she had tried several diets on her own. She began her day with a black tea followed by salads, had only sandwiches and coffee for lunch, and ate two slices of bread and vegetables for dinner, in spite of it she continued to add on the kilos.

Wrong diet, over fasting and sedentary lifestyle was aggravating her vata pulse, resulting in the patient bloating. Salads are strictly not recommended to people having vata.

Recommendations
The patient was put on a diet of whole or split green gram (mung), green gram soup, rice, vegetable soup with ghee (clarified butter) to be taken at four hourly intervals, with basti (medicated enema) treatment in panchkarma (the age-old science of purifying the body).

Within a fortnight, her pulse began to feel light and the vata level began to reduce. After the complete basti course spreading over a year, she lost 8 kilos. After three years, today her weight stands at 55 kgs and her pulse is healthy and steady.

I also taught her how to ‘feel’ her own pulse and now, whenever there is a slight rise in vata, she immediately embarks on a vata-pacifying diet that includes drinking 1 tsp of castor oil at bedtime with a glass of warm water, cooked rice, dates, vegetables, and sesame oil massage.

The lady doctor actually bounced back to health because of the correct diagnosis of a vata type of pulse. More importantly, she became self educated in diagnosing her own problem. Ayurveda is truly the ‘Science of life.’

**Case Study 2 – Pitta Pulse**

**Patient’s History**

A 25-year-old medical representative, with a history of asthma since childhood, came for a cure to his severe migraine problem. He had tried a variety of painkillers to combat the disease, but to no avail.

**Diagnosis**

On examining the patient’s pulse, I found that it was hot, fast, strong, and heavy to feel due to aam (toxins) created by indigestion and the pitta pulse was jumping more.

His job involved walking in the hot sun the whole day without fixed hours for eating meals. Besides, he was fond of spicy, fermented, sour foods, tomatoes, pizzas, yogurt, and alcohol.

Not only this, he was taking inhalers, antibiotics, bronchodilators, and steroids at frequent intervals for asthma, resulting in his immunity level being very low. His diet, lifestyle, and asthma medicines were pitta increasing. Hence, he was suffering from migraine.

**Recommendations**

I advised him to take 2 teaspoons of cow ghee first thing in the morning on an empty stomach to control pitta and a teaspoon of Triphala at night as a mild virechan to remove pitta.

After about a month-and-a-half, he reported a 50 percent reduction in the intensity of migraine and even his asthma attacks had reduced. Slowly, his asthma medicines were reduced. After six months, his pulse was free from aam and was very light to feel. With the heat in the body
controlled, the patient’s pitta pulse was not jumping more; it was healthy, light, and steady.

Case Study 3 – Kapha Pulse

Patient’s History
A 30-year-old businessman once came to me for treatment of diabetes and obesity.

Diagnosis
After checking his pulse, I immediately told him, “This is not you.” He replied that he was very slim until he started his business six years ago. Next, I asked him, “Are you diabetic?” because his pulse was very humid, with the kapha pulse very prominent.

“Yes, I am on insulin and my blood sugar is not under control even after medication.” He pleaded that he wanted to get rid of the insulin injections.

His pulse was very heavy to feel because he had aam. The sedentary lifestyle, stress and fondness for fried foods and sweet with no exercise had caused slow digestion and formation of mucous and kapha, which blocked his channels of pancreas, lungs, and intestines. This had resulted in increase in the blood sugar level, in cough, congestion in chest with respiratory problems, and severe constipation.

Recommendations
I advised him to walk for an hour daily. To begin with, he was put on a diet of mung soup, and mung with spices like dry ginger, oregano, asafoetida, black pepper, rock salt, onion, garlic, and coriander. Then, vegetables and rice was included in the menu.

He was asked to take a teaspoon of a mixture of turmeric and amla (gooseberry) powder on an empty stomach in the morning. At night, he was asked to take a teaspoon of castor oil with warm water. He successfully did virechan and enema treatment of panchkarma as well. Side by side, his insulin dosage was reduced every week.

After a year of adopting this lifestyle, his insulin was stopped and he regained his slim look once more. Today, his pulse is without aam (very light to feel) and the kapha pulse is feeble but prominent.
About the Author
Dr. Sumita Prajapati is an MD (Ayurveda). She took her degree from Podar College in Mumbai. A pulse-reading wizard, she practices at several clinics across the city, with thousands of patients benefiting from her treatment. She visits her patients in New York, Atlanta and California every 2 months. She travels to USA, Canada, London, and reunion (France).
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