

MILK IN THE AGE OF CONVENIENCE

By Arun Deva

As with all great treasures, milk comes with certain caveats. As our society further distances itself from nature and turns gradually more synthetic, these caveats turn into dire warning signals. A look at milk's qualities as expressed in the magnificent Ayurvedic text, the Caraka Samhita, shows the potentiality of both misuse and overuse. Caraka lists milk's qualities as sweet, cold, soft, lubricant, unctuous, smooth, slippery, heavy, slow and pleasant. In Ayurveda, milk is almost never drunk cold, as it is harder to digest and thus turns the milk from sattvic to tamasic in nature. Sattva is a state of lightness, equanimity, clarity, and, in this case, fortification, strength and vitality. Tamas, on the other hand, reflects dullness, confusion, sloth, and in this case, the process of compromising its quality, leading to ill health and the potentiality of allergies. But what exactly is "compromised" milk?

To answer this is to look first and foremost at its source: the Mother. When a nursing mother makes choices regarding her diet, she does so with the welfare of her infant in mind. She instinctively knows that what she eats will be passed on to her child through her milk, thus confirming milk as the essence of her diet, her emotional state and her health. It is not a far-fetched theory that makes a mother stay away from alcohol and cigarettes when she is nursing. It is, however, an act of "putting on the blinders" when she stops at that and does not extend the logic to her diet, her health and her emotional state. This begins the process of compromise of the quality of her milk and the obvious implication is the shifting of her milk away from the desired sattvic state. As in life, there is not just black and white; there are various shades of grey in between.

The Caraka Samhita, at least 2000 years old, lists eight recommended sources of milk, including cow, sheep, mare, elephant and human. It lists the varying qualities of each. Of all, cow's milk is considered the best for its ability to increase ojas, the essence of our immunity and vitality. Yet today, milk is a subject of great controversy regarding its benefits, especially as compared to its potential risks. These risks include high and unhealthy cholesterol levels, heart disease, cancer, osteoporosis, high blood pressure, constipation, lactose intolerance and allergies, among others.

So, how did our perception of milk shift from "best among rasayanas (rejuvenative)" to a highly suspect source of many illnesses? The answer must lie in the changing quality of milk as precipitated by the manner in which we treat its source: the mother. Whether cow, human or other, it is still only a mother that naturally provides milk. When I advise my clients or students about milk, I often tell them to get a healthy cow, put it in a large pasture with lots of green grass, let its calf play with it as a child does, then let the calf drink its full from it and then when you look into its large, liquid, loving eyes and you put a pail under it, you may not even need to milk it, the milk will be given to you that readily! This milk drunk fresh, warm and raw will nourish you like no other food in this world! Realistically, this scenario is almost impossible for most but its essential message can and should exist symbolically for all of us.

As is the case of the human mother, it helps to put things in perspective by remembering that the cow is, first and foremost, also a mother. The cow was always revered in India, her special status enshrined by the law. But now, as you walk the streets of India, in many alleys you will find a cow rummaging through the garbage for food. As a result one reads every few days about a dead cow, her stomach stuffed with discarded plastic bags.

In farm factories around the world, cows are forced into yearly pregnancies for their milk. After giving birth they are milked for 10 months, often they are artificially inseminated during the third month so that they can be milked even when pregnant. This stressful demand for production of

milk is more than her body can take, so she starts breaking down body tissue to produce milk. The result is an illness called ketosis. Most of the day the cow is tied up in a narrow stall usually wallowing in her own excrement till she goes lame. She may get mastitis because the hands that milk her so often are rough and usually unclean, so imagine her fate when milked by machines. She gets rumen acidosis from unnatural feed. She is also subject to the use of an array of drugs, including bovine growth hormone (BGH); prostaglandin, which is used to bring a cow into heat whenever the farmer wants to have her inseminated; antibiotics; and even tranquilizers, in order to influence her productivity and behavior. In India, when Mahatma Gandhi heard about the inhumane manner in which cows were being treated, he gave up drinking milk, something he had cherished all his life,

Cows on today's dairy factory farms live only about four to five years (often slaughtered because of mastitis), as opposed to the life expectancy of 20-25 years enjoyed by cows who are treated humanely and are free to roam and free of violent drugs. No cow lives out her normal life cycle. She is milked, made sick and then killed. Perhaps the greatest pain suffered by cows in the dairy industry is the repeated loss of their young. Female calves may join the ranks of the milk producers, but the males are generally taken from their mothers within 24 hours of birth and sold at auction either to the veal industry or to beef producers.

And what of the milk itself? Each cow has its own qualities of health and emotion, yet the milk we drink is freely mixed from all the cows on the farm. Ayurvedically, this milk is already tamasic and indigestible, causing confusion, lethargy, fear and anger. Surely a cow that lives in constant dread, fear of its life and deprivation from its calf, will carry emotions such as anger, outrage, fear and hate. These then are the emotions we digest when we drink its milk. The milk is further pasteurized (in this age of sterile metal containers, an oxymoron) and the good bacteria as well as the bad are destroyed. Since we need the good bacteria to help in the formation of lactase within us, we turn lactose intolerant. Ultra pasteurization, where the milk is violently heated from cold refrigerated to boiling in a couple of minutes changes the chemical composition into a mutated form the horrors of which we can only imagine.

It is this milk that we are expected to equate with the sattvic milk of the Vedas, of the yogis and of Ayurveda. By all standards it will fail. It is in fact no longer the panacea promised by Surabhi, the celestial cow of the Vedas. In the epic myth of the churning of the ocean (manthanam), among the fourteen great treasures that arose was this "cow of plenty". The ancient texts say that in Satyuga (age of perfection), dharma stands as a cow on four legs, in the Tretayuga (age of less than perfection), she stands on three, in Dwaparayuga (dwindling and disappearing perfection), just two and today, in what is widely believed to be Kaliyuga (age of decadence and destruction), she stands on but one leg.

If milk is the essence of a cow's diet, then what is this milk that arises from a steady diet of soy meal, cottonseed meal or other commercial feeds, even bakery waste, chicken manure or citrus peel cake, all laced with pesticides. Vitamins A and D are greatly diminished when milk cows are fed commercial feed, needing to be added in artificially. Soy meal has the wrong protein profile for the dairy cow, resulting in a short burst of high milk production followed by premature death. Real feed for cows is rapidly growing green grass, green feed, silage, hay and root vegetables. From a yogin's perspective, a cow is revered for the fortifying and complete meal offered by her milk. In the Mahabharata (Anusasana Parva), in a discussion between the Rishis Bhishma, Vasishta and Vyasa, is a sloka, a verse:

Cows constitute the stay of all creatures. Cows are the refuge of all creatures. Cows are the embodiment of merit. Cows are sacred and blessed and are sanctifiers of all.

One should never, in even one's heart, do an injury to cows. One should, indeed, always confer happiness on them.

When treated humanely, as is the case with all mothers, there is a magical quality to the milk of a cow. In 1929, Dr. J.R. Crewe of the Mayo Foundation published an article called The "Milk Cure." The treatment was a combination of a detoxifying fast and nutrient-dense feeding. The milk used was, in all cases, the only kind of milk available in those days—raw milk from pasture-fed cows, rich in butterfat. The patients were all fed small quantities of milk all day coming up to 5-10 quarts total and nothing else. Striking results were seen in diseases of the heart and kidneys and high blood pressure as well as edema, which is even more surprising because it is unorthodox to treat dropsy (edema) with large quantities of liquids. In the old Ayurvedic texts, milk acts often as an "anupasana," a carrier of medicinal herbs. In his wonderful Ayurvedic cookbook, Dr. Lad lists different medicated milks for different doshic disorders. Ayurveda strongly recommends a glass of warm milk with ginger and cinnamon at bedtime to help one sleep. Milk is considered both an aphrodisiac as well as replenishing after sexual activity. It is said that it takes up to 35 days for food's nutritional value to reach the reproductive tissue but that milk goes straight to it.

There is also a protocol to the drinking of this nutrient rich elixir. Since milk is a fortifying food/beverage, it has a kapha increasing nature; basically this means that it should not be had in addition to your meal. The concept of a glass of milk with breakfast, lunch or dinner is alien to Ayurveda for common sense reasons. Milk, because of its nourishing properties, which include cold and heavy, usually needs to be drunk warm and, unless you have a very strong agni, (the digestive fire) some digestive herbs like ginger or cinnamon should be added. It can be drunk at night before bed or as a complete morning beverage. Milk also gives us some of our other favorite foods: butter, ghee, lassi, yogurt or curds and of course, cheeses. All of these should be used with care and not indulged in because of their richness. It is said that the poorer nations suffer the curse of malnutrition and that the richer ones, where overindulgence is the norm, suffer from the curse of malabsorption.

We live now in an age of convenience. Many of our children in the big cities associate apples with a supermarket shelf and not a tree in an orchard. We expect to find any and all foods at any and all times conveniently provided, forgetting that Nature gives us seasonal foods for a reason. Milk is associated with plastic and paper cartons with the picture of a grazing cow, and yet the reality is what is inside that carton, not in its outside advertisement. It is understandable to want this convenience, after all it is the fruit of our social and cultural advancement, but we must at some point ask not just at what price but also how many of God's fair creatures, of whom we are supposed to show the most promise, are actually paying this price and in the end, we have to ask ourselves, what does this say about us? In the war between cows and humans and there is no question that we have subjugated them much as prisoners of such a war, there can never be any winners. After all, we started out as the best of friends and how could a war between friends ever end in a victory for one? They have not only been our partners all through our rural growth, but in a mutual trust and respect, continued to act as our mothers after we had become adults, providing us with milk, cheese, butter, and even fuel for our fires as cow dung and buffalo chips. A cow digests the essence of the earth through its grass, a very concentrated and hard food to assimilate, but because of their four stomachs, they are able to draw the earth's energy out of it and, having fed their babies, they share this wonderful panacea with us. When we treat a cow as a commodity to increase our convenience, when we refuse to see it as a living being, we demean ourselves. And in the end, when we make a cow sick with the wrong foods and inhumane treatment, it, in turn, makes us sick with mutated and perverted milk that is no longer a panacea but is instead very much a poison.

When we respect Nature, she will respect us. When we divorce ourselves from her, she has no choice but to honor that by staying away from us. In this age of convenience we have created diseases that reflect our alienation from that which gave us life and from whose elemental structure arises our own elemental structure. In this age of irrefutable global warming we have forgotten that in the end we must return to Nature in the shape of dust and that when we go to war with her, we actually go to war with ourselves. In this age of Kaliyuga, when Surabhi, the celestial cow, stands on one foot, Milk, the complete food, turns into Milk, the complete destroyer. If we heed the cries of Nature, we will in fact, hear the cries of the Mother. Every mother wants her milk to nourish her child, not be its poison.

It is also imperative that in this age that we see the potentiality of the next age of perfection. We can begin living it by honoring one of the symbols of that age, the cow standing on all four of her legs...if we begin to drink only milk that comes from cows that roam free, that eat good grass, that are able to nurture their calves, we may just find that indeed, milk is the perfect food of the yogis, both a cure and a rejuvenative.

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