

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF VEDANA IN AYURVEDA: AN INTEGRATIVE REVIEW OF PAIN

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ABSTRACT

Vedana, commonly translated as pain or sensation, is an important concept in Ayurveda that extends beyond the narrow biomedical interpretation of pain as a localized symptom. Classical Ayurvedic literature describes Vedana as a subjective experience arising through the interaction of body (*deha*), mind (*manas*), senses (*indriya*), and consciousness. It includes both pleasurable (*sukhatmaka vedana*) and painful (*dukhkhatmaka vedana*) experiences. In clinical practice, Vedana is most often associated with suffering, discomfort, or disease manifestation. However, its intensity, quality, and perception vary according to constitution (*prakṛti*), dosic imbalance, mental state, and site of involvement. Among the three dosas, Vata is regarded as the principal factor in the genesis and transmission of pain, while Pitta and Kapha modify its character and associated features. Ayurveda also recognizes the psychological dimension of pain, emphasizing the central role of *manas* in amplifying or alleviating suffering. Classical texts further classify pain into multiple categories such as *adhyatmika*, *adhibhautika*, and *adhidaivika dukkha*, reflecting physical, environmental, and subtle causes of distress. Management of Vedana is not limited to symptomatic relief but includes correction of causative factors through *sodhana*, *samana*, lifestyle regulation, herbal therapies, and mental equilibrium. This review presents a conceptual and clinically relevant understanding of Vedana in Ayurveda and highlights its potential contribution to contemporary multidisciplinary pain science.

KEYWORDS: Vedana, Pain, Sula, Dukkha, Vata, Manas, Vedanasthapana, Ayurveda

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda, the traditional science of life, aims to preserve health and restore harmony through maintenance of *dhatu-samyā* (physiological balance). Health is understood not merely as absence of disease, but as a state of physical comfort, mental stability, sensory clarity, and spiritual well-being. When this equilibrium is disturbed by improper diet, faulty lifestyle, psychological stress, environmental influences, or past actions, disease manifests and suffering emerge. One of the most common expressions of such imbalance is Vedana.

Unlike the modern reductionist model that often limits pain to tissue injury or nerve dysfunction, Ayurveda presents Vedana as a multidimensional phenomenon. It includes bodily sensation, emotional suffering, and the subjective interpretation of distress. Thus, the Ayurvedic understanding of pain is holistic, individualized, and deeply connected to both physiological and psychological processes.

Classical literature states:

स्पर्शोन्द्रियसंस्पर्शः स्पर्शो मानस एव च ।

द्विविधः सुखदुःखानां वेदानां प्रवर्तकः ॥

(*Caraka Samhita, Sarirasthana 1/133*)

This verse indicates that both sensory contact and mental processing are responsible for the experience of pleasure and pain.

Etymology and meaning of Vedana (Shool):

The term Vedana is derived from the Sanskrit root विद् (vid), meaning “to know,” “to perceive,” or “to experience.”

Traditional lexicons describe Vedana as sensation, awareness, knowledge, or suffering. Therefore, Vedana should not be understood solely as pain, but as any consciously perceived experience.

In Ayurveda, two broad dimensions of Vedana are recognized:

- **Sukhatmaka Vedana** – pleasant or agreeable sensation
- **Duhkhatmaka Vedana** – unpleasant sensation, pain, or suffering

This dual meaning reflects the Ayurvedic principle that sensation itself is neutral; its interpretation determines whether it is experienced as comfort or distress.

Harita mentioned Mythological origin of shool. According to that once God Shiva became angry on Kamdev who broke his meditation and then God Shiva threw his trishul to him. Kamdev became afraid and escaped in the body of lord Vishnu. Then God Vishnu turned the trishul towards the earth and since then the shool developed in the human body.

According to Sabdakalpadruma-

वेदनं / वेदना- विद् + ल्युट् । अनुभवः । तत्पर्यायः । संवेदः । इत्यमरः । ज्ञानम् । दुःखम् । इति मेदिनी । (शब्दकल्पद्रुम- चतुर्थ भाग, पृष्ठ संख्या-५००)

Looking towards the statement of Acarya Caraka, it becomes clear that area of vedana is very wide which includes both the healthy and diseased conditions. Here we should discuss the exact meaning of the word ‘vedana’ in the light of different dictionaries.

वातादृते नास्ति रुजा न पाकः पित्तादृते नास्ति कफाञ्च पूयः । (सुश्रुतसंहिता सूत्रस्थान-17/12)

There can not be pain (shoola) without involvement of Vata but pitta and kapha influences the nature and intensity of pain. Thus all three doshas (vata, pitta, kapha) as a whole are responsible for the origin, development and perception of pain (Su. Su. 17/12).

Subjective Nature of Pain:

Pain is inherently subjective. The same stimulus may produce different responses in different individuals. Ayurvedic scholars acknowledged this long before modern pain psychology. The intensity and expression of Vedana vary according to:

- Individual constitution (*prakṛti*)
- Mental resilience or vulnerability
- Dosic predominance
- Time and season
- Anatomical site
- Previous experiences
- Emotional state

Individuals with **Vata-predominant constitution** or aggravated Vata are often considered more sensitive to painful sensations because of the mobile, subtle, and reactive qualities of Vata.

Classification of Duhkha (Pain and Suffering):

Ayurveda classifies suffering into three major categories:

Adhyatmika Duhkha

Pain originating within oneself. It includes:

- **Saririka Duhkha** – physical suffering due to bodily disorders
- **Manasika Duhkha** – mental suffering such as fear, grief, anger, anxiety, or depression

Adhibhautika Duhkha

Pain caused by external animate or inanimate sources, such as trauma, environmental injury, accidents, or interpersonal harm.

Adhidaivika Duhkha

Pain arising from subtle, cosmic, seasonal, karmic, or unexplained influences.

This classification demonstrates that Ayurveda recognized biological, psychological, social, environmental, and metaphysical contributors to suffering.

Role of Manas (Mind) in Pain Perception:

Classical texts clearly emphasize the role of *manas* in both pleasure and pain. The mind acts as the mediator between sensory input and conscious experience. Even when bodily pathology exists, the experience of pain is shaped by attention, fear, memory, expectation, and emotional state.

Modern neuroscience similarly confirms that pain perception is influenced by cortical and limbic networks, stress pathways, and cognitive appraisal. Thus, the Ayurvedic concept of mind-centered pain modulation aligns with current biopsychosocial models of pain.

A disturbed mind may intensify pain, whereas calmness, self-control, meditation, and sattvic balance may reduce suffering.

Dosic Basis of Vedana:

Vata Associated Pain

Among the three dosas, Vata is considered the primary cause of pain. Classical texts state that pain does not occur without Vata involvement.

वातादृते नास्ति रुजा... (Susruta Samhita, Sutrasthana 17/12)

Because Vata governs movement, neural conduction, dryness, and sensitivity, its aggravation leads to:

- Piercing pain (Bhedana- Nakhabheda, janubheda, dantabheda, vidbheda etc)
- Colicky pain (Sula- padasula, karnasula, aksisula etc.)
- Shifting pain (Sputa- Padasuptata)
- Spasm (Graha- Gulphagraha, prsthagraha, trikagraha)
- Numbness (Udvestana- Piṇḍikodvestana, udaraveṣṭa)
- Stiffness (Stambha- Urustambha, Sepsastambha, Manyastambha)
- Tremors

Pitta-Associated Pain

Pitta contributes inflammatory and burning qualities such as:

Oṣa-	Heating
Ploṣa-	Scorching
Daha-	Burning
Davathu-	boiling
Dhumaka-	fuming
Vidaha-	Pirosis
Antardaha-	Burning sensation inside the body
Uṣmadhikya-	Excessive temperature
Avadarāṇa-	twagavadarāṇa- cracking of skin
Tṛṣṇadhikya-	Excessive thirst
Paka-	Mukhapaka, gudapaka, akṣipaka

Kapha-Associated Pain

Kapha is associated with:

- Heaviness
- Dull aching
- Swelling
- Rigidity
- Staimitya- Timidness
- Gaurava- Gurugatrata
- Srava- Mukhasrava, Slesmodgirāṇa
- Upalepa- Hṛdayopalepa, kaṅṭhopalepa

Thus, while Vata initiates pain, Pitta and Kapha modify its nature and clinical presentation.

Terminologies Related to Pain in Ayurveda:

Several Sanskrit terms describe different expressions of pain:

- **Sula** – severe localized pain, colic, sharp pain
- **Ruja** – pain or affliction
- **Piḍa** – distress or pressure-like suffering
- **Duhkha** – sorrow, suffering, discomfort
- **Bhedana** – splitting or piercing pain
- **Daha** – burning pain
- **Graha** – gripping or constricting sensation
- **Stambha** – stiffness or immobility

This vocabulary demonstrates the sophisticated symptom-language developed in classical medicine.

Sites and Clinical Forms of Vedana:

The sense organs are the most important sites for the manifestation of happiness and miseries. In Ayurvedic literature attention has been directed towards origin, nature of pain as well as classification of pain.

The word “Shoola” is also used for painful sensation. Indeed, Ayurveda has not only considered shoola as a symptom or as an independent disease entity but they have taken more comprehensive view regarding the etiology, pathology and management of pain. Shoola has been described as outcome of *Vata vyadhi*.

Shoola produces focal symptoms in the body. In Streeroga Shoola in the yoni (reproductive system) has been considered as a symptom of vatala yoni. Thus, it is clear that shoola has been considered as symptom as well as a disease in Ayurveda. Thus, Vayu in a particular individual or in some individual at different time might be the guiding factor for the perception of painful stimulus varying from negligible to severe pain depending upon the predominance of Vayu in the individual at that time. Pain from all over the body is felt in manas (brain) except from hairs, small hairs, tip of nails, ingested food, excreta, urine (Cha. Sha. 1/136). Sushruta has described following types of Shoola:

- Parshava shoola - Su. U. 42/188-119.

- Kukshi shoola - Su. U. 42/124-125.
- Hridh chhula - Su. U. 42/132
- Vasti shoola - Su. U. 42/134
- Mutra shoola - Su. U. 42/135
- Purish shoola - Su. U. 42/136-139
- Awipakaja shoola - Su. U. 42/142-144
- Prasav pida (labour pain)
- Shiro Ruja (Headache) - Su. U. 25/3
- Shoola is also complication of disease - Su. U. 42/67
- Traumatic pain is also described by Sushruta in Su. Su. 5/42 and Su. Chi 2/82
- Pain due to Burn - Su. Su. 12/16
- Pain due to foreign body - Su. Su. 27/22
- Pain is commonest symptom of Trauma - Su. Chi 1/6

Pain may be local, radiating, intermittent, constant, superficial, deep, mild, or severe. Many other descriptions of Shoola, Vedana, Pida, Ruja etc. exist in classical Indian literature and many methods of preparation drugs have been described for alleviating painful condition.

Clinical Assessment of Pain:

Ayurveda encourages detailed evaluation of pain. Important parameters include:

- **Site** – localized or generalized
- **Radiation** – fixed or spreading
- **Severity** – effect on function or sleep
- **Duration** – acute or chronic
- **Character** – pricking, burning, throbbing, cramping
- **Aggravating factors** – movement, food, weather, stress
- **Relieving factors** – rest, posture change, evacuation, warmth, food, therapies

This resembles modern pain history-taking and supports individualized diagnosis.

Management of Vedana in Ayurveda:

The treatment of pain in Ayurveda is comprehensive and cause-oriented.

Sodhana (Bio-purification)

शोधन उपक्रम- बस्तिर्वातहराणाम्, विरेचनं पित्तहराणाम्, वमनम् श्लेष्महराणाम्।

Used when systemic dosic aggravation is present:

- **Basti** – especially for Vata disorders
- **Virecana** – for Pitta disorders
- **Vamana** – for Kapha disorders

Samana (Pacification Therapy)

प्रायोगिक स्वरूप- मदनफलं वमनास्थापनानुवासनोपयोगिनाम्, त्रिवृत सुखविरेचनानाम्, चतुरंगुलो मृदुविरेचनानाम्, स्नुकपयस्तीक्ष्णविरेचनानाम्, स्वेदो मार्दवकराणाम्।

शमन उपक्रम- सर्पिर्वातपित्तप्रशमनानाम्, तैलम् वातश्लेष्मप्रशमनानाम्, मधु श्लेष्मपित्तप्रशमनानाम्, अन्नं वृत्तिकराणाम्, सुरा श्रमहराणाम्, स्नानं श्रमहराणाम्, रासना वातहराणाम्, एरण्डमूलं वृष्यवातहराणाम्,

हिंगुनिर्यासश्चेदनीयदीपनीयानुलोमिकवातकफप्रशमनानाम्, गोक्षुरको मूत्रकृच्छ्रानिलहराणाम्। (चरकसंहिता सूत्रस्थान-२५/४०)

Includes:

- Medicated ghee
- Oils
- Herbal formulations
- Diet regulation
- Restorative regimens

Vedanasthapana and Mahakasaya Concepts

Caraka described groups of herbs known for analgesic and restorative actions, such as:

- **Vedanasthapana Mahakasaya**
- **Sulaprasamana Mahakasaya**
- **Aṅgamardaprasamana Mahakasaya**
- **Sramahara Mahakasaya**
- **Vatasamana Gaṇa**

Ultimate Relief of Vedana:

योगो मोक्षे च सर्वासां वेदनानामवर्तनम्। मोक्षे निवृत्तिर्निःशेषा योगो मोक्षप्रवर्त्। (चरकसंहिता शारीरस्थान-१/१३७)

सर्वसंन्यासः सुखानाम्। (चरकसंहिता सूत्रस्थान-२५/४०)

Ayurveda extends the discussion of pain beyond symptom relief to existential freedom. Classical texts indicate that complete cessation of suffering is achieved through higher states of yoga and liberation (*moksa*), where the cycle of painful experience ceases. Meditation, yoga, breath regulation, sattvic conduct, and counseling can reduce the mental amplification of pain. This philosophical dimension enriches the therapeutic model by linking physical care with mental peace and spiritual well-being.

DISCUSSION

The Ayurvedic concept of Vedana offers a remarkably advanced understanding of pain. Rather than treating pain as a single symptom, Ayurveda interprets it as a dynamic interaction among dosas, tissues, senses, mind, and consciousness. This anticipates the modern biopsychosocial model, which recognizes the influence of physiology, psychology, and environment on pain.

The primacy of Vata resembles the role of neural signaling and sensory transmission in contemporary medicine. The role of *manas* parallels modern evidence on stress, mood disorders, catastrophizing, and emotional modulation of pain. Furthermore, the individualized approach of Ayurveda—based on constitution, causation, and symptom quality—supports personalized pain management.

In chronic pain disorders, where structural findings alone often fail to explain symptom severity, the Ayurvedic model provides valuable interpretive depth and therapeutic flexibility.

CONCLUSION

Vedana in Ayurveda is a comprehensive concept encompassing sensation, suffering, and subjective experience. It includes physical pain, mental distress, environmental affliction, and constitutional susceptibility. Vata plays a central role in pain genesis, while mind strongly influences pain perception. Ayurvedic management aims not only to suppress symptoms but to restore systemic balance, improve resilience, and address root causes. The conceptual framework of Vedana remains highly relevant for integrative medicine, chronic pain care, and future interdisciplinary research.

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