

On Point with Ayurveda in Italy

How a neuroscientist frustrated with the allopathic approach to health became one of Europe's foremost champions of Ayurveda

BY SUDARSHAN RAMABADRAN, CHENNAI
I WAS CHARMED BY DR. ANTONIO MORANDI'S presentation during the UN's World Day for Cultural Diversity for Dialogue and Development ("World Culture Day" in India) event held online by the Indian Council for Cultural Relations on May 21, 2020. As he spoke on the contemporary relevance of Ayurveda, his love for India, Hinduism, Vedic science and Ayurveda itself was self-evident. Trained as a neuroscientist, he had worked three decades in that field in the US and Italy before the limitations of modern medicine became too much for him. Two decades ago, he turned to Ayurveda. Today, after lengthy training in India, he heads Ayurvedic Point, a school and clinic in Italy, and is president of the Italian Scientific Society for Ayurvedic Medicine.

Dr. Morandi's passions coincide precisely with our work at the India Foundation's Center for Public Diplomacy and Soft Power, as he exemplifies one of our major goals. We have identified Ayurveda as one of India's civilizational strengths. As such, we are advocating the creation of a World Ayurveda Day, along the lines of the International Yoga Day, which likewise celebrates one of India's key soft powers. Partners in this effort to create a World Ayurveda Day include Rajiv Vasudevan, head of AyurVAID Hospitals; Dr. Rammanohar, research director of Amrita School of Ayurveda; JIVA Ayurveda; and 60 organizations in 32 countries. Our pilot initiative in 2019 was endorsed by India's Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy (AYUSH) and the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

Guiding our thinking in part was a 2017 study by the Confederation of Indian Industry, which warned policy makers and practitioners not to let Ayurveda be appropriated by other countries—as has happened with yoga—but rather to keep it firmly attached to its roots. Dr. Morandi is an excellent example of how Ayurveda can be successfully transplanted to a European country with full authenticity.

One Doctor's Journey to Ayurveda

The word best used to describe Dr. Morandi would be *inquisitive*. All his life, he has intended to understand the functioning of the mind. This drove his study of neurology and



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his career as a conventional medical practitioner. But he did not find there the answers he was looking for.

"Modern medicine dealt with health science in a fragmented way. I felt I needed a different epistemological approach, one that could give me a global world view and could link elements which were considered by modern medicine to be separate, unrelated. Thus, I started to explore other systems of knowledge. After some consideration of diverse areas, in both traditional and non-conventional medicines, I found my pathway to Ayurveda," he explains.

He has studied Ayurveda in India and from Indian teachers in Europe, and continues his study on a daily basis. His principal teachers have been Maharishi Vaidya Jaya Ramanuja Raju and the late Ashtavaidyan Alathiyoor Narayanan Nambi. He maintains close connections with Raju and with Nambi's family.

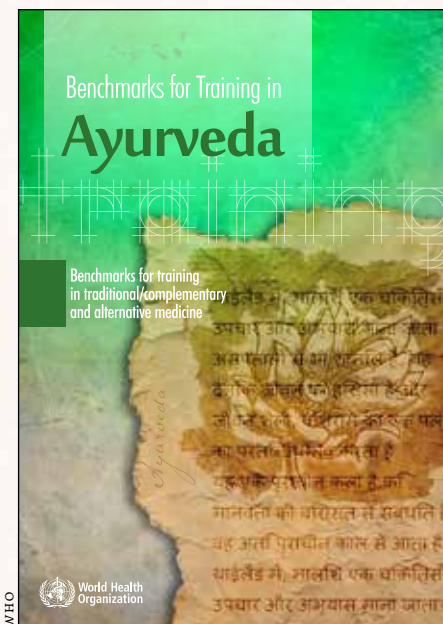
He has taken Swami Joythimayananda, a Sri Lankan Tamil saint, as his spiritual guru and considers him a great master of yoga and Ayurveda. Morandi recounts he initially found it difficult to accept spirituality, owing

to his background in neurology and attitude as a modern physician. But soon he realized that spirituality enabled him to look beyond those limitations. "In following Swamiji, I began to understand who I really am."

Inspired by Swamiji, Morandi established Ayurvedic Point in 2001, with cofounder Carmen Tosto. Tosto studied Ayurveda with the Nambi and Ashtavaidyan Thaikkattu Mooss families. In the process, both she and Dr. Morandi embraced Hinduism. Carmen first met Morandi through Swami Joythimayananda with whom she was also studying Ayurveda. "My goal and dream," she said, "had always been to promote the integration between yoga and Ayurveda. Morandi and I began to work together by founding Ayurvedic Point, with a twofold objective: the care of patients and the creation of a training school in Ayurveda operated with respect to the tradition. Our experiences in India with our teachers guide and inspire our steps to this very day."

Ayurveda for Today's World

"Challenges to modern medicine are fast



WHO

Ayurveda, Italian style: (clockwise from left) Dr. Morandi and Carmen Tosto, cofounders of Ayurvedic Point; cover of the World Health Organization's 61-page guideline for Ayurveda; the May 21st online conference on Ayurveda and Covid-19 to mark World Culture Day; class at SNA Oushadhasala, India

emerging," Morandi observes. "There's an increasing disease burden for which the pharmaceutical industry is failing to produce cures."

Ayurveda's person-centered approach is mainly concerned with the maintenance of health, the prevention rather than the treating of disease. Because it looks beyond the purely structural and material view and considers life as a whole, Morandi believes it has much to offer contemporary health science. This is exactly, he points out, the approach of the 21st-century physicists who are attempting to include the phenomenon of consciousness in their understanding of the universe.

He explains, "The nature of the individual is a parameter on which the whole system's scale is tuned. Health is resilience, or the capacity of adaptation of an organism to the environmental variations. Ayurvedic diagnosis is based on the definition of the *prakriti*, the inborn psycho-physical constitutional health state of the patient. Its biomedical validity has recently received wide confirmation from genomic studies. Health is an individual, relative state, and *prakriti* explains the individual susceptibility to particular diseases. Ayurveda promotes a model of positive health, thinking, feelings and general state of well being."

But Ayurveda is more than just health. Morandi believes Ayurveda reflects all the *darshanas* (schools) of philosophy in which



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Indian thought is rooted. It is itself a full-fledged knowledge system, only one component of which is medicine. In fact, states Morandi, "I don't like to use the term *Ayurvedic Medicine*, because it is very limiting and reflects the deterministic model of thinking, which is typical of the modern Western world. The Western system of thought is based on objects and that everything must be well defined and have clear boundaries to be understood." The holistic knowledge system of Ayurveda, on the other hand, provides a representation of reality within which we can define our most appropriate lifestyle, one in perfect alignment with nature and with the possibility of enjoying an ideal state of health.

Ayurveda Enables Sustainable Living

Morandi's holistic approach to Ayurveda mirrors that of the Ayurveda Day Pledge developed by our team in India: "I pledge to

make Ayurveda an integral part of my daily life and thereby enable good health and well-being for myself, my family, and my community, in harmony with nature." This was accepted by all participating countries and affirms the importance that Ayurveda attaches to coexisting with nature.

Living in harmony with nature has been a consistent theme in the various conferences on Ayurveda Morandi has organized over the past decade. Ayurveda helps one know nature through the eyes of nature, thus it is one of the best enablers of sustainable living. It is a science of perfect ecology. Morandi sums it up aptly: "In the West, ecology is the study of environmental balances, but always considers man as an external observer. In Ayurveda the ecology includes man and it is an autopoiesis mechanism." *Autopoiesis* means "a system capable of reproducing and maintaining itself," which nature should be if man, in particular, respects his place in it.



ALL PHOTOS: AYURVEDIC POINT

At the clinic: (counterclockwise from top left) learning proper footwork; preparing for the shirodhara oil treatment; ingredients at the ready; demonstrating the shirodhara technique; eye treatment; well-equipped clinic room

Ayurveda's Legal Status in Italy

Morandi has worked diligently to increase the acceptance of Ayurveda in Italy. Currently, he explains, Ayurveda is considered as a "medical act" by the Italian Federation of Medical Doctors board. By *medical act* is meant any activity which deals with the health of people and involves diagnosis and prescription. In Italy the practice of ayurvedic diagnosis and prescription can be performed only by a certified modern medical doctor who also has a certified training in Ayurveda—a significant constraint.

No traditional form of medicine has yet been duly and fully recognized by the Italian government. But Morandi is positive there is growing interest in academic, scientific and clinical worlds towards Ayurveda in particular. For example, he recounts, "We have just completed a project in collaboration with the University of Milan, Departments of Neurology and Clinical Psychology, on Duchenne muscular dystrophy." In addition, he is actively involved with the University of Milan's Faculty of Medicine to develop an elective course, "Introduction to Ayurveda," to expose fifth- and sixth-year medical students to the principles and vision of Ayurveda.

Programs at Ayurvedic Point

Morandi and Tosto founded Ayurvedic Point in 2001 to help manifest this vision of Ayurveda in Italy. The activities of Ayurvedic Point comprise three key pillars: an educational and cultural sector; the school of Ayurveda; and a clinical and research sector. Since 2007, Ayurvedic Point has been awarded the ISO 9001 certification of quality for its teaching activities.

The School of Ayurveda offers two four-year postgraduate courses, one for physicians and one for technicians. Each course follows a comprehensive set of training standards in Ayurveda produced by the World Health Organization (bit.ly/WHO-Ayurveda).

In addition, Ayurvedic Point offers in-depth clinical research programs in collaboration with the Ayurveda Research and Education Institute of SNA Oushadhasala, one of India's leading producers of ayurvedic products.

Students at Ayurvedic Point can earn credits under the Italian Governmental Program of Continuous Education in Medicine. The course for technicians is also recognized by Accredia, a private, nonprofit organization recognized by Italy and the European Union which publishes voluntary technical standards, including UNI norm 11756:2019, the standard for Ayurveda. Morandi says it has taken six years of hard work to accomplish this much, and still Ayurveda has no official recognition in Italy as a medical system. In general, he explains, alternative medicine contends with political and economic interests and an overall hostile environment.

Ayurvedic Point's teaching board currently comprises fifteen teachers, ten of whom are medical doctors with documented clinical, research and teaching experience. Coordinating the faculty are two medical doctors and a certified Ayurveda technician who is qualified both in India and Italy.

Ginevra Franzoso graduated as an Ayurveda technician in 2019 after four years of study and now works at the Milan clinic. He continues to be a student of the joint SNA/Ayurvedic Point program in India and Italy. Franzoso's immensely grateful for his training and, as he puts it, "the opportunity to meet Ayurveda in its most traditional and purest sense." "My life," he states, "has profoundly changed. As I have travelled down this path, I have understood how strong and vital this ancient knowledge is and its impact on all of us."

Over 100 students are currently enrolled in the school. In the 19 years since its founding, 400 students have completed the four-year course either as doctors (who necessarily are licensed allopaths in Italy) or technicians in Ayurveda. With the help of SNA Oushadhasala they have developed a further diploma program, "specialist in panchakarma." There are two courses of study, one four years for doctors and the other three years for technicians. Six hundred students



the conferences over the years has been 'Ayurveda: The Meaning of Life,' with a focus on the relationship between awareness, environment and health. Each event produced large echoes in the worlds of Ayurveda and modern science. Prof. Brian Josephson, Nobel laureate in physics, opened the first congress in 2009. These events witness participation by high-level policy makers from both India and Italy, including the vice president of Italy's Health Commission, members of the Senate of the Italian Republic, India's consul general for Italy, joint secretaries and advisors of India's AYUSH Ministry."

A Broader Vision Going Forward

In his decades of studying and serving Ayurveda, Morandi has found it possible to address, understand and deal with any subject through the principles and vision of Ayurveda. He explains: "When we encounter Ayurveda, a deep part is activated within us that makes us feel connected with everything and everyone. This gives us the possibility

to manage and overcome the perceived limitations of material reality. Through Ayurveda, it is therefore possible to attract and bring together interests of various kinds. Ayurveda is never coercive in nature."

Because of this inherent quality, the India Foundation's Center for Soft Power is committed to showcasing the strength of Ayurveda as yet another gift from India to the world. According to Morandi, the first Ayurveda Day in 2019 was a milestone that generated a tsunami of awareness and spread organically throughout the world. But he advises that consistent coordination among practitioners and ambassadors of Ayurveda is essential for widespread dissemination of the practice. Also required is consistent worldwide exchange of the latest developments and research findings. Ultimately, Mo-

randi sees the creation of a World Interactive Ayurveda Network.

Although the WHO is the UN-designated nodal organization for international dissemination of traditional systems of medicine and their integration with current practices, Morandi points out it has not yet made much progress on this front. He believes the promotion of Ayurveda can counteract the present lack of focus and coordination among practitioners and facilitate a broader integration of traditional medical systems overall.

Looking Ahead

In his communications and writings, Morandi categorically states that India and the world must firmly anchor Ayurveda to its original tradition in order to assure its future. He believes humanity's traditional knowledge is the only path to finding our true nature and the meaning of life. We must establish a seamless dialogue between Ayurveda and modern medicine in order to successfully advance medicine and the other sciences.

Morandi foresees a global expansion of Ayurveda in the next ten years. Not only the products and techniques, but the knowledge system itself will resonate with the global populace. But he is well aware that any effort to concretize and legitimize the benefits of Ayurveda will need social will from elected leaders in each country, and not just from Ayurveda ambassadors, doctors and enthusiasts.

For this to happen, he believes existing scientific support for Ayurveda should be brought to the forefront. This should be done with the clear understanding that Ayurveda has its own epistemology and cannot be explained in and through a Western scientific lens or be bent and distorted to satisfy the models of modern medicine. "If modern medicine and Ayurveda can meet in order to enable greater stimulus and forge a new paradigm of development in the field of medicine and science, it could benefit humanity at large in the future," Moraldi concludes.

I, for one, am fully convinced Ayurveda is in safe hands with such a seeker as Morandi. After his deep study of science and long practice of its tenets, he realized its limitations and turned to Ayurveda to understand the real potential of life. His sincerity is evident. India, he has stated, is both the mother and the future of all civilizations. He speaks of the vision and mission of Ayurveda with a childlike enthusiasm, and asserts confidently that based on a thorough, evidence-based approach, Italy will soon see its way to recognize this holistic form of medicine.

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