

THE CURRENT STATE OF PULSE READING IN THE WEST

Exploring Modern Technologies and the Questions they Raise

The art and science of ayurvedic pulse reading is a wonderful example of what happens when we take an ancient methodology and throw it head-first into the pool of a new culture, with vastly different world views and cultural underpinnings. We, in the West, respond to pulse reading the way we respond to most foreign influences. Some of us find ourselves curious, attracted to the mystique of something new, yet old, relevant, yet timeless, eager to unlock whatever potential secrets are contained within. Others of us find ourselves skeptical towards a form of knowledge that came before the creation of what we have now, sophisticated technologies that answer questions which were mysteries of the past. We find an ancient art threatening in a way, especially when it comes to assessing something so personal and intimate as our own health. “*Nadi Pareeksha*” means something very different to the Western ear than does “Pulse Diagnosis” even though the two names refer to the same science. Many of us, experience these feelings of allure and skepticism simultaneously. It is up to us to carry on a conversation that has already begun in the “Wild West” of Ayurveda - How do we best integrate pulse reading into the sub-culture of Western Ayurveda, and then into the culture at large?

Those of us who are not simply willing to replace the practice of pulse reading with more modern technologies are charged with explaining and demonstrating the subtleties and nuances of a science that often appears quite subjective, or unbelievable to the onlooker, especially the onlooker that is not already enmeshed in the ayurvedic world. The flesh and blood practice of pulse reading opens the art up to the human element, for both its blessings and drawbacks. On the one hand, the human nervous system, especially when trained properly, is capable of extraordinary feats of sensitivity and detection. Coupled with an intuitive mind capable of compassion, a refined pulse reader can journey into aspects of human health that a modern technology cannot. On the other hand, human error, and the changeable day-to-day nature of an individual practitioner lends itself to the fear of inconsistency and unreliability. Combined with a variety of “styles” that exist within the pulse reading world, many have chosen to gaze upon pulse reading as a subjective art as opposed to a hard science, rendering it unworthy of taking its place amongst X-rays, MRI’s, CAT scans, endoscopies, etc.

There is an emerging technology that attempts to pacify the skeptic’s mind by creating a computerized method of Ayurvedic pulse reading. One such technology uses measures of Heart Rate Variability (HRV) and then maps those measures onto ayurvedic concepts such as *prakruti*, *vikruti*, *panchamahabuta* (five primordial elements) balance, *nidana* (root cause of imbalance), etc. Cuffs are placed on each of the rogi’s wrists which begin to measure the heart rate and the nuances thereof. A software then analyzes these patterns and creates various reports, translated into ayurvedic terminology, based on the findings. Technology such as this carries the potential of explaining the technique and underlying structure of what the pulse reader experiences in terms of previously studied Western, scientific definitions and viewpoints. The creation of these technologies also opens doors to journey into the little-explored wilderness of fusing modern technology with ayurvedic concepts. Ayurveda itself, as a fundamental axiom of the science, promotes the continuous discovery and utilization of new techniques and application of new medicines, so long as the balance of the whole is held in the position of highest priority.

The adoption of new technology is not without peril however. While the skeptic may suddenly find himself or herself much more comfortable accepting the ancient practice, now that its “secrets” have been explained in Western scientific terms, it is quite an additional leap to then assume that a technology can replace a human. Perhaps HRV is not the only underlying explanation for what a sophisticated pulse reader is assessing, measuring, feeling and discerning. Simply because it answers questions in certain terms that make us feel at ease, resting on concepts that we already have a cultural measure of acceptance, does not make it *the* answer. And what of the effect of human-to-human interaction on the physiology of the rogi as opposed to the human to machine interaction? And who is there to interpret the results of a technology-based pulse reading? Are they subject to the same conditions as the human pulse reader? From what lens and viewpoint did the software get designed? And what if the practitioner does not “agree” with the findings of the technology? Is the practitioner supposed to rely on his or her own experience or defer to the software’s analysis? What level of sophistication does a practitioner need to achieve before he or she is as sensitive as the technology? These are but a few of the important questions that the culture of Ayurveda in the West will have to respond to in the coming times as Ayurveda exponentially gains popularity and the pressure of an increased demand for accuracy and measurability grows from the Western world of medicine.

Another factor to consider in this conversation is the impact that learning the art and science of pulse reading has on the practitioner. Many of the principles of Ayurveda spring to life, in real time, while reading a rogi’s pulses. This begins to shape the experiences of the practitioner and has the potential to mature his or her understanding of the deep waters of ayurvedic principles. One of Ayurveda’s great messages, hidden just below its surface, is the healing quality it has on those who engage in its clinical practice. Whether or not pulse reading technologies come into vogue, the ayurvedic community in the West must maintain the importance of transformational effect a practice has on the practitioner. Many styles of pulse reading exist in the ayurvedic world because many different practitioners incorporate a wealth of experiences in different manners. This is not a divisive reality, nor should it be taken as evidence that pulse reading is somehow unreliable. Rather, it expresses an abundance of *living* experiences that, when properly wielded, for the benefit of a rogi, take the shape of *sattvic*, balancing, counsel.

Traditionally, pulse reading is a practice that is handed down from Guru to disciple. Even in the West this tradition is often honored and upheld. However, as we see with many ayurvedic practices, this model is not wholly applicable to the Western world. Some may believe that makes pulse reading incompatible with a Western style of education. Others believe that this is not an issue as is evidenced by the ever-increasing number of ayurvedic schools and professionals in the West. Currently, there is more of a desire and demand to learn the science of pulse reading in the West than there has ever been. Ayurvedic professionals trained in the West, often times by Ayurvedic Doctors and Vaidyas trained in the East, want to engage in that same special lineage of wisdom and enthusiastically wish to weave it into their lives and thusly their culture. This important amalgamation of timeless wisdom that blossoms from a healing science that transcends race, culture and class can be the beating heart of pulse reading in the West, so long as the ayurvedic community wishes it to be so. The beauty of the current state of pulse reading in the West is that it is just beginning.

The physical component of the practice of pulse reading, meaning, placing one's fingertips on the radial artery in a specific manner, can serve as a gateway into deeper experiences of *manas* (mind) and *atma* (soul). There is a physiological reality to the changes that occur to the nervous system of both the practitioner and the rogi during a pulse reading session, and these changes may very well serve as a springboard into more direct experiences of doshic activity. In the human experience of pulse reading, the physical sensations picked up by the fingertips must be integrated and interpreted by the mind and intuitive capacities of the atma. This only occurs from direct experience and involvement. We could, and should, expect a different interpretation of the results when direct perception and involvement is absent, as is the case when a practitioner reviews a report generated by a technology without actually reading a rogi's pulse.

This is not to say, however, that nothing is to be gained by the interpretations yielded by technology. Pulse reading observations ascertained by a variety of practitioners, whether woman/man or machine, can assist us in the infinite dive towards the essence of ayurvedic wisdom so long as we do not get side-tracked by fears of fallibility or caught up in the minutia that the use of technology often lends itself to. The continued study and advancement of the art and science of pulse reading creates an arena, rich with possibility, for further research and insight into the physiological and more subtle realms of healing.