

The Times

Alternatives: Body & Soul

August 18, 2007

Wide awake diet

An ancient Indian health system helped one woman to fight fatigue

David Mattin



Lauren Wilkinson used to find that every day was a battle with fatigue. While she was in her early thirties, pursuing a highflying City career, a constant, nagging tiredness crept up on her. She reached a crunchpoint in 2003. "I'd lost all my energy," she recalls. "I was sleeping 15 hours a night at weekends and was too tired to see friends."

The Royal College of Psychiatrists says that about one Briton in ten suffers from prolonged fatigue, with the condition more common in women. In fact, being tired all the time - TATT, as doctors call it - is one of the most common reasons for visiting our GPs. In a small number of such cases, physical illnesses such as anaemia, thyroid problems, or diabetes are to blame. A tiny minority - about 150,000 in the UK, according to the NHS - suffer from chronic fatigue syndrome, a little-understood disease that causes profound exhaustion, unrelieved by rest. But in about 90 per cent of "tired all the time" patients no cause is found and GPs are likely to advise on ways to decrease stress.

Wilkinson, though, now 40, found an answer in the Indian health system called Ayurveda. With roots in Indian philosophy dating back 2,500 years, Ayurveda teaches that supplements made from herbs, minerals and animal products, as well as dietary changes, can help to balance the five elements - space, air, water, fire, earth - that comprise the human body. The results, practitioners claim, can equal a transformation in health and wellbeing.

By 2003, says Wilkinson, every part of her life was affected by tiredness. She had given up her career and had space to take stock. "In 2004 I began to train as a counsellor; I was used to academic work from university, but now even writing essays felt so hard because of the constant fatigue." Although medical professionals advise going to see your doctor first, to eliminate anything serious, Lauren didn't consult her GP: "It didn't occur to me there might be an answer." That was, until she heard friends enthusiastically discussing Ayurveda.

Wilkinson had her first appointment with the Ayurvedic practitioner Sascha Kriese in November 2005. Kriese, who took a degree in Ayurvedic medicine at Thames Valley University, began the session, as always, by taking her pulse, using three fingers placed on her wrist. Pulse reading is a key diagnostic method in Ayurveda. According to a crucial Ayurvedic concept called the tri-dosha system, the human body is governed by three constitutional humours - the manifestations of the five fundamental

elements in our body – called doshas: vata, pitta and kapha. In a healthy body, the three doshas are balanced; if they fall out of balance, ill-health will result.

“By reading the pulse, I’m feeling for subtle signals,” Kriese says. “What is the rhythm? Through this I can ascertain the state of the doshas and infer what is happening in the body. Kapha stands for the body’s immunity, strength and resilience, and in Lauren this was low. High vata means a build-up of air and space in the body; this will cause poor renewal processes in the body, and poor movement of blood and hormones. High pitta is a build-up of fire and this will cause poor digestion; there will be an increase in toxins and undigested food. I knew immediately that one major consequence would be that Lauren must be constantly exhausted.”

Kriese had not yet asked Wilkinson what was wrong with her. It was only after the pulse reading that he took a detailed medical history, which confirmed that she was suffering from constant tiredness. Treatment involved two major strands. First, Ayurveda has a long tradition of herbal medicines and Kriese prescribed four different supplements. “These supplements contain between six and 19 herbs each,” he says, “and each one is understood by Ayurvedic pharmacology to have a specific impact.”

Haritaki, for example, is an extract from the fruit of a herbaceous plant that, according to Ayurvedic wisdom, promotes healthy digestion: one of Kriese’s key aims for Wilkinson. Brahmi, another plant extract he prescribed, is held to help to restore mental clarity and settle the nervous system.

The second major treatment strand was diet. “Sascha told me to cut out all red meat, all dairy, and all wheat,” says Wilkinson. “Also - and less expected - he said it was crucial that I ate no raw vegetables.” Kriese says that Ayurveda teaches that raw vegetables “are impossible to digest properly when digestive fire is low; it is better to cook them gently, making the nutrients more accessible”.

Returning for a follow-up session after ten days, Wilkinson already felt a small increase in energy. “Nothing dramatic,” she recalls, “but I had noticed a difference.” She says that sticking to the dietary advice was hard at first, “but as I saw gradual improvement in my energy levels, I was motivated to continue”. Over the next few months she experienced a gradual increase in energy and vitality that she says amounted to a transformation.

By continuing to take herbal supplements and maintaining the advised dietary changes, Wilkinson says that she has finally achieved freedom from the tiredness that dogged her for years. She saw Kriese again in December 2005, and March and February last year; her last appointment with him was last August.

After retraining as a counsellor, Lauren works as a project worker with the homeless in London. “Looking back over the past two years, it’s an unbelievable transformation,” she says. “I’ve just got so much more energy; I can concentrate when I work and I sleep normal hours. For the first time in years I even have room in my life for fun. I’ve got into Facebook and I’m seeing more of friends. It all sounds terribly basic, but for me it’s a huge change. And it’s only possible because Ayurveda has given me my life back.”

For more details, please contact:

Ayurvedic Practitioners Association (www.apa.uk.com)