

Functional Classification of Digestive and Eliminative Therapeutic Actions in Ayurveda: A Comprehensive Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda presents a sophisticated classification of therapeutic actions (Karma) based on functional pharmacodynamics rather than chemical composition alone. Digestive and eliminative therapies occupy a central position in this framework due to the primacy of Agni (digestive fire) and the pathological role of Āma (metabolic toxins). Classical texts describe graded categories of digestive stimulation, metabolic correction, doṣa pacification, and purificatory elimination. This review synthesizes eight major therapeutic classifications—Dīpana, Pācana, Saṁśamana, Saṁśodhana, Anulomana, Sraṁsana, Bhedana, and Rechana—into a unified academic discussion. The article highlights their conceptual foundations, pharmacodynamic distinctions, and potential correlations with modern gastrointestinal therapeutics.

Keywords: *Agni, Āma, Dīpana, Pācana, Saṁśamana, Saṁśodhana, Anulomana, Rechana, Ayurvedic Pharmacology, Gastrointestinal Therapeutics.*

Introduction

In Ayurvedic pharmacology, Karma denotes the functional outcome produced by a drug or therapeutic intervention. Unlike conventional biomedical models that emphasize receptor-level or biochemical mechanisms, Ayurveda conceptualizes drug action through systemic functional modulation of doṣa, Agni, and metabolic balance [1].

Impairment of digestive capacity (Agnimāndya) is regarded as a fundamental etiological factor in disease pathogenesis [1]. Inefficient digestion leads to formation of Āma, a pathological intermediate that obstructs physiological channels (srotas) and disturbs doṣic equilibrium [2]. Consequently,

restoration of digestive competence and elimination of morbid accumulations constitute the foundation of Ayurvedic clinical management.

Review Methods

This review integrates two interconnected therapeutic domains:

Digestive regulatory actions.

Eliminative and purificatory actions.

A. Digestive Regulatory Actions

1. Dīpana (Digestive Fire Stimulation)

पचेन्द्रियं वह्निकृत् दीपनं तद्यथा मिश्रिः |Sa.Sa 6/62

Dīpana dravyas stimulate digestive fire (Agni) and improve appetite.

दीपनाय वद्देः उद्दीपनाय हितम् |Bhā.Pr. Pū. 6/25

Dīpana substances enhance the activity of digestive fire.

दीपनम् अन्तरग्नेः सन्धुक्षणम् |Śā.Sa. Pū. 4/5

Dīpana therapy increases the strength of Agni without directly digesting Ama.

- Conceptual Definition

Dīpana refers to substances that stimulate digestive fire (Agni) without directly digesting accumulated Āma.

- Pharmacodynamic Action

Enhances appetite, Increases digestive capacity, Improves gastric and metabolic activity, Does not actively eliminate toxins.

Substances possessing pungent (Kaṭu), sour (Amla), and salty (Lavaṇa) tastes are typically categorized under Dīpana.

- Modern Correlation

Comparable to appetite stimulants (Appetizer) or agents that enhance gastric secretion; however, Ayurveda conceptualizes this at a systemic metabolic level.

2. Pācana (Metabolic Digestants)

पचत्यामं न वह्निं च कुर्याद् दीप्तिं पाचनम्।

नागकेशरवद्विद्यात् चित्रोदीपनपाचनः |Śā.Sa. Pū. 4/6

Digests āma, does not markedly increase digestive fire, and a substance having both actions: stimulating Agni and digesting Ama

Example: Mesua ferrea (Nāgakeśara)

पचन्तमग्निं प्रतिपक्षक्षपणेन बलदानेन च यत् पाचयति तत् पाचनम् |Cha.S. Su. 4/11

Removal of antagonistic factors (like āma), strengthening the digestive fire, promotes digestion.

- Conceptual Definition

Pācana refers to substances that digest Āma without significantly stimulating digestive fire.

- Pharmacodynamic Action

Facilitates metabolic detoxification, Breaks down accumulated pathological metabolites, Corrects impaired digestion.

Unlike Dīpana, Pācana emphasizes toxin digestion rather than appetite enhancement.

- Modern Correlation

Partially comparable to enzymatic digestion and metabolic detoxification, though Ayurvedic understanding extends beyond biochemical reductionism.

3. Saṁśamana (Palliative Pacification)

न शोधयति न द्वेष्टि समन्दोषान् स्थोद्वतान् ।

समीकरोति विषमान् शमनं ॥

Śhā.Sa. Pū. 4/7

Śamana therapy restores balance without expelling doṣas from the body.

आकाशगुणभूयिष्ठं संशमनम् | (Su.Su.41)

Saṁśamana therapy is characterized by Ākāśa (space) qualities, producing subtle, light, and diffusive action that gently pacifies the doṣas.

- Conceptual Definition

Saṁśamana refers to therapies that pacify aggravated doṣas without expelling them from the body.

- Mechanism

Restores doṣic equilibrium, Neutralizes aggravated functional states

Maintains internal balance, Indicated in mild to moderate disease stages where elimination is unnecessary.

4. Saṁśodhana (Purificatory Elimination)

स्थानाद्द्विर्नयेद्दूर्वमधश्च मलसंचयम् ।

Śā.Sa. .pu 4/8

This refers to the removal of accumulated wastes (mala) from the body through both upward and downward routes.

देहसंशोधनं तत् स्याद् देवदालीफलं यथा ॥

Śā. Sa. Pū. 4/8

Such elimination of impurities is called Deha-Saṁśodhana (body purification), exemplified by purgative drugs like Devadālī, which expel toxins from the body.

- Conceptual Definition

Saṁśodhana involves expulsion of aggravated doṣas from the body.

- Mechanism

Mobilizes morbid doṣas, Eliminates them through physiological routes

Removes root cause of disease, This category forms the basis of Panchakarma therapies.

B. Graded Eliminative Actions

Ayurveda further refines gastrointestinal elimination into graded categories based on intensity and mechanism.

5. Anulomana (Downward Regulation of Vāta)

कृत्वा पाकं मलानां यद्विद्धा बन्धमधो नयेत् ।

तच्चानुलोमनं ज्ञेयं यथा प्रोक्ता हरीतकी ॥ Śā.Sa. 4/9

Anulomana digests accumulated mala and facilitates their downward elimination; Harītakī is a classical example.

अनुलोमनो वातप्रवर्तनः । Su.Su. 46 Ṭikā

Anulomana promotes the downward movement of Vāta, aiding normal bowel movement.

सरोडनुलोमनः प्रोक्तः । Su.Su. 46/511

It softens stools and facilitates easy evacuation.

- Definition

Facilitates normal downward movement of Vāta and promotes natural evacuation.

- Action Profile

Mild bowel facilitation, Relieves gaseous distension, Regulates physiological flow

- Modern Correlation

Mild laxative or carminative effect.

6. Sraṁsana (Moderate Laxative Action)

पक्तव्यं यदपक्त्वैव श्लिष्टं कोष्ठे मलादिकम् नयत्यधः संसनं तद्यथा स्यात् कृतमालकः ॥ Śā.Sa. Pū. 4/10

Sramsana refers to the action that moves partially digested or accumulated waste downward without complete digestion, facilitating its elimination. Kṛtamālaka is cited as a classical example.

- Definition

Moderately expels accumulated mala without excessive force.

- Action Profile

Softens stool, Promotes evacuation, Maintains relative physiological balance

- Modern Correlation

Therapeutic laxative.

7. Bhedana (Strong Purgative Action)

मलादिकमबद्धं यद्वद्धं वा पिण्डितं मलेः ।

भित्वाधः पातयति तद् भेदनं कटुकी यथा ॥

Śā. Sa. Pū. 4/11

Bhedana refers to drugs that break or disintegrate hard, compacted fecal matter and expel it downward. Kaṭukī is a classical example of a Bhedana drug.

- Definition

Breaks up hardened fecal matter and forcibly expels it.

- Action Profile

Sharp and penetrating, Disintegrates impacted stool, Strong bowel stimulation

- Modern Correlation

Stimulant purgative.

8. Rechana (Therapeutic Purgation)

विपक्कं यदपक्कं वा मलादि द्रवतां नयेत् ।

रेचयत्यपि तज्ज्ञेयं रेचनं त्रिवृतो यथा ॥

Śā.Sa. Pū. 4/12

Rechana refers to drugs that liquefy fecal matter and expel it downward; Trivṛt is a classical example.

दोषहरणम् अधोभागं विरेचनसंज्ञकम् । Cha. Ci. 1

Virechana is the therapy that eliminates aggravated doṣas through the lower route.

सलिलपृष्ठ्यात् कमलात् अधोभागप्रभावात्

तच्चौषधम् अधः प्रवर्तते ॥ Cha. Ci. 15

These medicines act downward due to their specific potency, leading to purgation.

- Definition

Eliminates aggravated doṣas, especially Pitta, via purgation.

- Pharmacodynamic Properties

Heat (Uṣṇa), Sharpness (Tīkṣṇa), Subtlety (Sūkṣma), Penetrative capacity, Rechana is systemic detoxification rather than simple bowel emptying.

- Modern Correlation

Therapeutic purgation with systemic intent.

Integrated Therapeutic Continuum

Ayurveda conceptualizes digestive and eliminative therapy as a sequential strategy:

A) Stimulate digestion (Dīpana), Digest accumulated toxins (Pācana)

Pacify imbalance (Saṁśamana), Eliminate morbid factors (Saṁśodhana)

B) Apply graded bowel evacuation (Anulomana → Sraṁsana → Bhedana → Rechana)

This demonstrates a structured escalation model tailored to disease severity and constitutional factors.

Comparative Overview

Category	Primary Aim	Intensity	Modern Analogy
Dīpana	Stimulate Agni	Mild	Appetite stimulant
Pācana	Digest Āma	Mild–Moderate	Metabolic correction
Saṁśamana	Pacify doṣas	Variable	Symptomatic control
Saṁśodhana	Eliminate doṣas	Strong	Detoxification therapy
Anulomana	Regulate Vāta	Mild	Mild laxative
Sraṁsana	Moderate evacuation	Moderate	Therapeutic laxative
Bhedana	Break fecal impaction	Strong	Stimulant purgative
Rechana	Systemic purgation	Strong & systemic	Therapeutic purgation

Discussion

The Ayurvedic classification of digestive and eliminative actions represents a multidimensional pharmacodynamic framework. Unlike modern medicine, which classifies bowel regulators mainly by mechanical or chemical mechanisms, Ayurveda integrates factors such as metabolic capacity (Agni), toxic accumulation (Āma), doṣic imbalance, intensity of intervention, and stage of disease. This nuanced stratification supports personalized therapy and graded therapeutic escalation based on clinical evaluation. Recent integrative research has begun exploring correlations between Agni, metabolic inflammation, gut microbiome modulation, and detoxification pathways [5–8].

Conclusion

The therapeutic categories of Dīpana, Pācana, Saṁśamana, Saṁśodhana, Anulomana, Sraṁsana, Bhedana, and Rechana collectively represent a sophisticated model of digestive and eliminative medicine in Ayurveda. Their conceptual clarity and graded therapeutic approach offer valuable insights for integrative gastrointestinal research and clinical practice. Further interdisciplinary research correlating these classical classifications with biochemical, microbiome, and metabolic markers may enhance global understanding of traditional pharmacology.

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