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# Keeper of Tradition

Victor Hettigoda is guardian of authentic ayurveda

Words by Daleena Samara, photography by Neil Karunaratne.

Deshabandu Dr. Victor Hettigoda rarely takes his finger off the pulse of ayurveda. In a little more than three decades, this fourth-generation ayurvedic physician and chairman of Hettigoda Industries, principal of international ayurvedic products and spa chain Siddhalepa, has played a key role in bringing the island's ayurvedic healing system into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, being opposed to the compromises to the system caused by the commercialisation of ayurveda, he sees the need to awaken the world to the authentic practice of this ancient science.

Dr. Hettigoda also believes that Sri Lanka, with its long tradition of herbal holistic healing, is poised as the ideal destination to experience ayurveda in its purest form.

"We who know ayurveda in Sri Lanka need to tell the world what it really is," he says, adding that current misconceptions result from encounters with dubious practitioners who can damage the reputation of this noble discipline.

Dr. Hettigoda's own brand of ayurvedic health services and products, Siddhalepa, has played a key role in contemporizing quality ayurveda for the modern consumer. Named after his company's iconic balm, that has become a household name in the island for healing everyday aches and pains, the brand today has a respected presence not only in Sri Lanka, but in Germany and The Czech Republic too.

In Sri Lanka, the company operates the Siddhalepa Ayurveda Health Resort in Wadduwa, the Siddhalepa Ayurveda Hospital, and Anarva Day Spa in Mt. Lavinia, as well as a spa at Waters Edge Golf Club, and a centre at the Bandaranaike International Airport. Recently, it opened the SAS, the Siddhalepa Ayurvedic Spa,

in the city's upmarket Colombo 7 district. Siddhalepa's products are also to be found at selected spas in the Maldives.

"Only 10 percent of the world is aware of ayurveda. Of them, only five percent have experienced it, and only two percent know it well," says Dr Hettigoda.

"The practice of ayurveda is more widespread in India than in Sri Lanka. However, the Sri Lankan form of practice is better recognized, due mainly to a high standard we maintain here."

Siddhalepa's own state-of-the-art factory conforms to ISO and other international quality benchmarks, and the company invests heavily in research and development, constantly expanding its product range. It currently offers around 50 different ayurvedic products, ranging from herbal tonics and teas to pills and hair oils. In the pipeline is a range of Siddhalepa ayurvedic beverages.

Dr Hettigoda's vision of Sri Lanka as the leading destination for the authentic ayurvedic experience is well grounded, as the island lends itself well to the practice. Few countries are greener than this beautiful Indian Ocean island – a flight over almost any part of the island reveals dense forest canopy below – and this rich cloak of vegetation forms the foundation of ayurveda, a plant-based medicinal system born in the foothills of the Himalayas, about 5,000 years ago.

The system spread across South Asia and took deep root in Sri Lanka, complementing existing indigenous therapies. Closely connected to spiritual practices such as yoga and meditation, ayurveda won the support of Buddhist monks and monarchs in ancient Sri Lanka, with ayurvedic

physicians patronized by royalty and enjoying a high standing in the social hierarchy. A number of kings, in particular King Buddhadasa (340-368 AD), were physicians themselves. Ancient rock inscriptions bear witness to a comprehensive state-sponsored ayurvedic healthcare system, while ruins of ancient ayurvedic hospital sites can be seen in the ancient capitals and spiritual centres of the country.

Although ayurveda has today greatly been supplanted by Western medicine, many of its practices have endured as home remedies among the general populace. So inherent is this wisdom in the people of Sri Lanka that even a corporate executive will reach for a cup of sweet coriander and bitter *weniwal* before he heads for the doctor at the first signs of influenza.







People - Keeper of Tradition



The surge of interest today in Western countries such as France, Italy, Germany, and the UK, stimulated by celebrity endorsement by the likes of Madonna, Sting, Demi Moore, and Christy Turlington, has caused a resurgence of interest in ayurveda within Sri Lanka. Further, health crises in the form of epidemics are awakening people here to the need to re-adopt healthier lifestyles, recognizing that ayurveda offers natural solutions to the problems they are facing.

Whilst such interest is to be encouraged, Dr. Hettigoda points out the need to be discerning, and to create standards that would eliminate unqualified or dubious practitioners from operating under the guise of ayurveda. He promotes caution amongst consumers, especially when choosing products and services, pointing out that the public should know that a scented oil, for example, will only be of limited benefit, but cannot substitute for a complete course of treatment. The authentic ayurvedic cure is a long process, because the objective is to get to the root of the ailment, and to cleanse and rid the body of the disease.

"A physician will study the patient's

skin, eyes, and pulse before making a diagnosis. Authentic practitioners, who have gone through four or five years of study and who have not only learned ayurveda, but lived it, will have developed a sixth sense that assists them to diagnose a disease," he says. "They also study the patient's skin, eyes, and pulse and consider his or her lifestyle before making the diagnosis. They will use Western medical technology to complement their own practice, for example, by asking the patient to do an x-ray or lab test to aid in their analysis."

Dr. Hettigoda himself comes from an unbroken line of ayurvedic physicians, going back four generations. In addition to mastering the family medical tradition, his father Hendrick de Silva Hettigoda spent 15 years in the Himalayas, honing his healing skills. An eminent kidney specialist, Hendrick Hettigoda was fluent in Sinhala, Pali, Sanskrit, and English, and a respected astrologer.

After graduating from school, Victor Hettigoda understudied his father for nearly 12 years. He spent many late nights burning the midnight oil, engrossed in ola-leaf manuscripts and books. In reward for these efforts, his

## Colombo gets first ayurvedic spa

To experience an authentic ayurvedic pampering, step into Siddhalepa's new spa in Colombo 7. It's the real thing.

The SAS offers a host of authentic ayurvedic treatments to relax, detoxify, and rejuvenate body, mind, and spirit, under the guidance of qualified ayurvedic physicians and therapists.

All treatments follow traditional time-tested formulas, and are available to address specific conditions. For instance, the 'Vathra Shudhi' facial rejuvenates blemished and dull skin, while the 'Kaayala Guthwava' oil rub assists in breaking down fat cells. The 20-minute Urovasti is administered to the *uras*, or chest, to treat pain in the sternum. Shirodhara treatments – a process of pouring a fine stream of warm oils onto the third-eye area of the forehead for a specific period of time – and fomentations, the use of heated herbal compresses, are also on the list of services.

The baths are a treat – ranging from a soak in milk to immersions in waters containing such fruit and vegetable such as papaya (paw-paw), pumpkin, cucumber, and *siyambala* (tamarind).

Siddhalepa's signature pebble walk is also available to relax tense feet.

SAS offers short treatments as well as half- and full-day sessions. All treatments use Siddhalepa products and are supervised by qualified practitioners.