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Book Review: Good Living Practices

Tobin Hack, AHC

Author: Dr. Rammohan Rao, PhD

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Amidst the global upheaval and polarization for which the year 2020 will be remembered, molecular neuroscientist, Ayurvedic practitioner, and yoga instructor Dr. Rammohan Rao has made a timely offering. *Good Living Practices* is a meticulously organized, empowering, and accessible guide to the basics of health and wellness, as outlined by Vedic principles and supported by modern scientific evidence. Dr. Rao has watched as many health and wellness resources have become increasingly hyper-focused on single practices, principles, or tools, sometimes missing the forest for the trees. A wellness book or plan might, for example, cover a very specific paleo diet, B vitamin, or exercise modality in great depth, without addressing the role that emotions must necessarily play in healing, or without acknowledging our fundamental human need to connect with other living beings through selfless service. With *Good Living Practices*, Dr. Rao wishes to ground his reader in “the importance of keeping the body, mind and emotions in sync, as one unit” – the whole, broad picture – and to provide a kit of practical tools ready to be used to that end. A

widely published molecular neuroscientist, Dr. Rao has been steeped in and curious about Vedic health principles since his childhood, but did not formally turn to or study Ayurveda until he was well into his career. As a graduate student, he examined the effects of pesticides on brain-resident proteins at play in sleep apnea. After earning a PhD in neuroscience, Dr. Rao spent time at the Mayo Clinic, where he contributed to the field of Alzheimer’s research, then joined Dr. Dale Bredesen’s Buck Institute for Research on Aging. There, he dove into more than a decade of intensive research on chronic stress and neuronal cell death, and identified novel biochemical pathways that play key roles in memory loss. Dr. Rao had longed to bring an even more integrative mindset to his field, but it wasn’t until his wife was faced

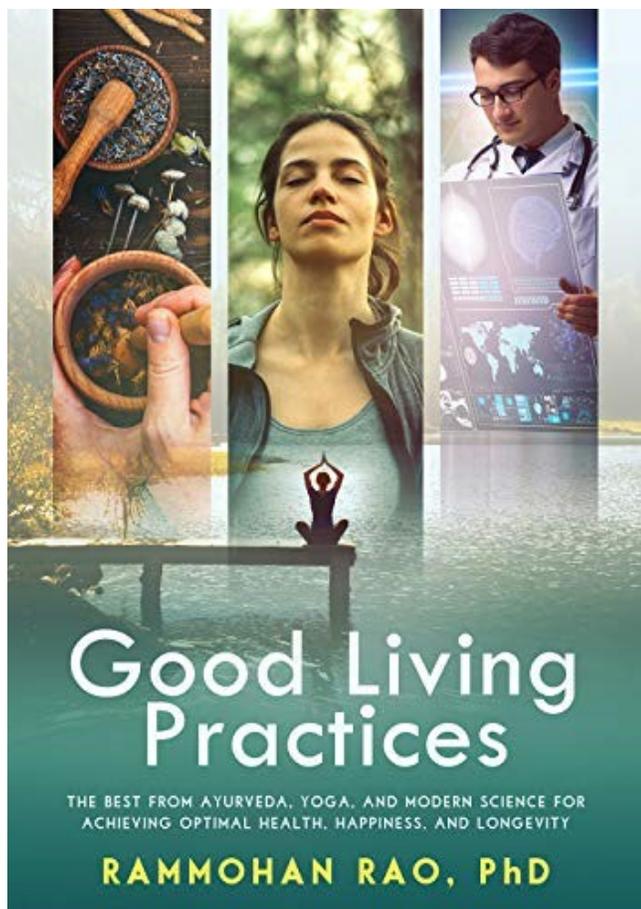


with a complex autoimmune disease, and the side-effects of her western pharmaceutical treatment, that he turned to Ayurveda and began in earnest to explore what a truly integrative approach to health would mean to him. His wife's symptoms soon in remission, it wasn't long before Dr. Rao found himself a NAMA Board Certified Ayurvedic Practitioner, yoga teacher, and faculty member at the California College of Ayurveda. *Good Living Practices* honors both east and west, ancient and modern, and reads as a distillation and a synthesis of all that Dr. Rao has lived and learned.

A guide meant to be used and used often, *Good Living Practices* is laid out in three sections: good physical practices, good mental practices, and good emotional practices. Each of the three sections draws from both east and

west to explain *why* these practices are at the foundation of good health, and then provides plenty of strategies and tools to develop each one. The section covering good physical practices focuses on eating well, moving well, and “tuning” the sense organs, while the section covering good mental practices focuses on sleep, exercise and sharpening for the mind, and the hugely important health benefits – to the giver – of true selfless service. Finally, the section covering good emotional practices focuses on meditation, cultivating the five “noble” emotions, and overcoming emotional obstacles such as anxiety and addiction. An instructional book written with a pragmatic aim, *Good Living Practices* does not wow its reader with linguistic pyrotechnics, or brandish fancy theories for show. Rather, it connects its reader to the wisdom already within him, and makes him want to *apply* its good advice. Readers may find themselves setting the book down to sign up for a volunteer opportunity, cook a simple meal of fresh ingredients, try a body scan meditation, take a stab at the “paraphernalia brain sculpting game,” or meditate on the idea of forgiving someone who has hurt them. Dr. Rao's ultimate goal is not health for health's sake, but rather as a path to happiness, satisfaction, clarity, joy, and bliss.

Importantly, the suggestions made in *Good Living Practices* are remarkably accessible. Incorporating more high-prana foods into one's diet won't require a large budget or a huge investment of time. Neither will meditating, practicing sharpening one's mind while waiting in line at the gas station, or performing small acts



of selfless service and forgiveness throughout the week. For those who are able, doing a little “light stretching, twisting, and lifting” while watching TV couldn’t be more manageable.

Likewise Karna Mastika, or “super brain yoga,” which merely involves crossing the arms, holding opposite earlobes, and performing a few squats to move the blood to the brain, regulate breathing, and activate pressure points connected to clear hearing.

One of Dr. Rao’s talents as a teacher lies in his ability to distill complex medical concepts into their simplest and most fascinating form. He might briefly mention that the neuronal firing pattern by which the colon moves its cargo along nearly exactly matches the rhythmic pattern of our brain waves. He might note that oil pulling “activates the salivary enzymes that help to draw out cellular debris and other toxins.” He might use the metaphor of hikers widening a trail as they pass through the woods, to quickly explain neuroplasticity. “Good quality sleep activates the pruning machinery,” he breezily explains at one point, “to trim the excess neuronal branches formed from some of the recent events in your life.” In efficient, colloquial language, Dr. Rao brings intricate mechanisms of the body to life. The reader need not have a PhD in molecular neuroscience in order to understand and reap the benefits of the practices laid out in this guide. And neither, on the other hand – again a teacher at heart – does Dr. Rao shield his reader from uncomfortable truths. “Your thoughts are extremely powerful as they control your psyche and have the

ability to nurture or destroy you,” he notes in the book’s mental practices section. Yet even in delivering such weighty messages as this one, he keeps his language simple, clear, direct, and free of judgement.

Dr. Rao gives the reader a sense of himself as a person, by peppering the text with anecdotes from his own life; he might joke, for example, that his dentist is displeased by his oil pulling routine, as it leaves too little work to be done. Dr. Rao also reveals his delighted, sattvic teacher’s heart in moments such as when, at the end of every *single* chapter, he repeats: “Reminder: For optimal results, continue to integrate the practices from all previous and future chapters into your daily routine. The more practices you can include in your life, the more results you will see!” The recurring reminder reads less as a literal instruction, and more as a kindly grandfather’s pat on the knee; he believes in the goodness and potential of his readers, and wants to spur each and every one on to good health.

For those readers already steeped in today’s medical world or ever-expanding wellness industry, Dr. Rao’s emphasis on selfless service and forgiveness will strike a chord. There is such a focus these days, in medicine and wellness, on *looking* fit, on nutrition, on biohacking, crunching data, optimizing, maximizing, winning. It is easier than ever, in 2020, to forget that to give, to truly give, is and has always been one of the most effective ways in which we humans nourish ourselves – and, incidentally, extend our health spans. It is easier

than ever to ignore what we know in our bones: that we cannot feel whole without connecting selflessly and generously with other living beings on this planet.

Good Living Practices is a generous resource to return to over and over again. It will improve the libraries of novices to, students of, and

practitioners in as wide a range of healing arts fields as one can imagine. It will serve as an anchor for anyone who wishes to develop or polish their own personal daily practices.

Tobin Hack is a Boston-based writer, editor, Ayurveda Health Counselor, and functional health and wellness coach. She holds a BA in English from Princeton University, an MFA in fiction from NYU, and Ayurveda health counseling certification from the Kripalu School of Ayurveda. She received her functional health coaching training from the Kresser Institute.