

[Siddha Medicine Man](#)

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Dr. P.R. Balasubramaniam handed over a little spindly bit of brown root after dipping it in some water. "Hold this between your thumb and forefinger," he directed. Pinned between my two fingers, the root's arms began to slowly twirl in the air, one wrapping around the other, while both were aligning with my body's invisible magnetic field. "Feel the force up your arm," he excitedly questioned. A definite electric surge was streaming up one major nerve pathway to the shoulder muscle. I was wired by a 2-inch root.

"That's sanjivi. Precious, potent - good for a variety of ailments from wounds to headaches," the doctor explained. Of course, sanjivi, just the most famous herb from India. And here was a man who knew the hidden hillsides where it is found and the secrets of how to use it. Balasubramaniam is a siddha doctor, a 63-year old practitioner of an herbological medicine school at least 3,000 years old. Siddha means "accomplished or perfected one" - the school's name deriving from the 18 siddha yogis who developed and promulgated this healing science. Siddha medicine is the southern India counterpart to the ayurvedic healing school which predominates in North India and is undergoing widespread adoption in Europe and North America. Siddha medicine has yet to emigrate out of its homeland with one exception: German pharmacologists have annually come to South India to copy siddha texts. These go back to Germany where their secrets may be alchemized into a drug worth millions, if not billions, of dollars.

The doctor's clinic is above the lobby of the Old Woodlands hotel in Madras. It's empty spacious with a high, wood ceiling, soft green walls and one side completely open to the bright sunlight, fresh air and gnarled trees filled with crows in the evenings. Speaking of crows, the siddha school's principle text is called "Five Birds" - eagle, peacock, cock, owl and crow. Legend recounts that the siddhas observed what plants and seeds these birds would eat.

The doctor showed me his thumb, where there was a major scar welted across the

upper pad. "That's the siddha initiation mark. My guru cut my thumb and squeezed in sanjivi juice to give the power of blessing." That was 30 years ago when he had finished his training with his guru, Thambyswami, a whiterobed siddha master from Kerala. He was then a life insurance salesman, interspersing his sales roadwork, with long, wandering apprenticeships under a number of masters. Earlier, at age ten, he was initiated into raja yoga by Swami Jnanananda, training under him 'til 20. Balasubramaniam was a natural 'sorcerer's apprentice.'

The young apprentice routinely went on adventurous excursions into South India's Blue Mountains and the hilly regions surrounding Palani Hills and Courtallam - all excellent herb country. With a pharmacology of 300 herbs and seeds, the siddha doctor needs to know his pastures - although it must be stated that the Chinese herb doctors deal with about 5,000 herbs. Many scholars believe the Chinese system developed out of India. "Jnanasiddha first taught me where to collect and the methods of preparation," noted Balasubramaniam. "But much of the real practice is in diagnostics. Some cases are extremely serious - people close to death. One mill owner had an extremely fast pulse and heart arrhythmia. Kasivishvanath, then my teacher, powdered sun-dried red hibiscus and avaram leaves, then mixed them in buttermilk for consumption. This mixture cleanses the arterial walls and strengthens the heart muscle. In a week he was up."

There are siddha lay doctors and real siddha yogis. The siddha yogis use metals as well as herbs. Mercury, normally poisonous, was chemically altered through a process called "killing," making it ready for ingestion. One of the most famous siddha creations is the Palani Hills Temple deity of Lord Muruga. It was made some 1,700 years ago from nine mysterious and poisonous metals by Bhogarishi, a Saivite siddha of Chinese origin. "We aren't taught the metalurgic side of siddha medicine," says the doctor. "For the lay doctors it's definitely advised against exploring. That's for the yogis. Some have tried duplicating the nine-metal composite. All failed."

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