

## **AYURVEDA AND ASANA**

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Have you ever wondered why some yoga poses seem to leave you calm, centered, and balanced, while others make you agitated, sore, and off center? Or why your best friend flourishes in a rousing "Power Yoga" workout, while you do best on a regimen of slow, gentle stretching?

The ancient Indian healing system known as Ayurveda can help you answer such questions. According to Ayurveda, different people require very different yoga practices. As a yoga teacher and doctor practicing Ayurvedic medicine, I've experienced firsthand how Ayurveda—in addition to the dietary and lifestyle advice that it is best known for—can shed light on the practice of yoga.

Take the case of the 31-year-old woman who came to me complaining of nervousness and chronic neck pain. She had been practicing yoga for six years and still could not understand why she was still experiencing these difficulties.

Our work with Ayurveda helped this woman understand how the Asanas she had been practicing had aggravated the subtle energies of her body. She also learned new Asanas that were more in harmony with her unique energetic balance. With this new knowledge, she was able to modify her practice and eliminate her neck pain and nervousness, bringing greater well-being to her body and mind.

### **Sister Symptoms**

Yoga and Ayurveda are two paths intertwined in such a close relationship that it is hard to imagine traveling down one of these paths without knowledge of the other. Ayurveda, which means "knowledge of life," is the ancient art and science of keeping the body and mind balanced and healthy. Yoga is the ancient art and science of preparing the body and mind for the eventual liberation and enlightenment of the soul.

Like Hatha yoga, Ayurveda teaches how to keep the physical body healthy, and how this health relates to our spiritual journey. Both yoga and Ayurveda spring from the ancient Sanskrit texts called the Vedas. According to Vedic scholar David Frawley, "Yoga is the practical side of the Vedic teachings, while Ayurveda is the healing side." In practice, both paths overlap.

In fact, Ayurveda and yoga are so closely related that some people argue that Patanjali, the first codifier of yoga, and Caraka, the first codifier of Ayurveda, may have in fact been one and the same person. Philosophically, both yoga and Ayurveda are rooted in Samkhya, one of six schools of classical Indian thought. The foundation of this philosophy can be described as follows:

1. There exists a fundamental state of pure being that is beyond intellectual understanding and which all life consciously strives for. This is the state of enlightenment or self-liberation.
2. Suffering is a part of our lives because of our attachment to our ego or self-identity (Ahamkara).
3. The path toward ending suffering is the path of dissolving or transcending the ego. In doing so, all fear, anger, and attachment are eradicated.
4. To achieve this goal, we must live a purely ethical life. (Ethical guidelines are listed as the Yamas and Niyamas in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali.)
5. Any disturbance within the mind or body interferes with this path. Ayurveda is the science of keeping the biological forces in balance so that the mind and body may be healthy.

### **Fundamentals of Ayurveda**

According to Ayurveda, the universal life force manifests as three different energies, or doshas, known as Vata, pitta, and kapha. We are all made up of a unique combination of these three forces. This unique combination, determined at the moment of conception, is our constitution, or prakruti. The three doshas constantly fluctuate according to our environment, which includes our diet, the seasons, the climate, our age, and many more factors. The current state of these three doshas most commonly defines our imbalance, or vikruti. Since we all have a unique constitution and unique imbalances, each person's path toward health will be unique. In addition, what will keep each of us healthy is also unique. Understanding our prakruti and vikruti offers each of us the potential to make correct choices.

The three doshas are generally described in terms of the five elements: earth, air, fire, water, and ether (the subtle energy that connects all things). Vata is said to be made up of air and ether. Likened to the wind, it is said to be light, drying, cooling, and capable of movement. Pitta is said to be made up of fire and water. Considered to be mostly fire, it is hot, light, and neither too dry nor too moist; it does not move on its own, but it can be easily earth, which combine like mud. Kapha is heavy, moist, cool, and stable.

The three doshas fluctuate constantly. As they move out of balance, they affect particular areas of our bodies in characteristic ways.

When Vata is out of balance—typically in excess—we are prone to diseases of the large intestines, like constipation and gas, along with diseases of the nervous system, immune system, and joints. When pitta is in excess, we are prone to diseases of the small intestines, like diarrhea, along with diseases of the liver, spleen, thyroid, blood, skin, and eyes. When kapha is in excess, we are prone to diseases of the stomach and lungs, most notably mucous conditions, along with diseases of water metabolism, such as swelling.

When working with the doshas, remember these basic principles: Like increases like, and opposites balance each other. In other words, foods, weather, and situations that have similar characteristics as the doshas will increase them; those that have opposite characteristics will decrease them. Knowing this, you can adjust your yoga practice, diet, and other environmental factors to affect these forces in ways that create greater balance and harmony. (For example, Vata types—who are dry, light, and airy—should avoid foods with similar qualities, like popcorn, and consume foods with opposite qualities, like warm milk).

### **The Three Gunas**

Another fundamental Ayurvedic principle is the idea of the three Gunas, or qualities of nature. The three Gunas—sattva, rajas, and tamas—are used to describe emotional and spiritual characteristics.

That which is sattvic is light, clear, and stable. Sattva is the state of being, which comes from purity of mind, and leads to unawareness of our connectedness to God, a state in which we manifest our most virtuous qualities.

That which is rajasic is active, agitated, or turbulent. Rajas arises emotions such as fear, worry, anger, jealousy, attachment, and depression.

That which is tamasic is heavy, dull, dark, and inert. Tamasic actions include violent or vindictive behavior, along with self-destructive behaviors such as addiction, depression, and suicide.

All movement or activity is by nature rajasic (agitating) and heating to the body. Yet some movements are more agitating and others less so. Generally speaking, the slower the movement, the less rajasic and the less agitating to the body and mind. The faster the movement, the more rajasic and the more heating it will be.

Any movement practiced with great awareness becomes more sattvic. Movements done with distraction or less attentiveness are more rajasic. Thus, one way to enhance our experience of yoga is to practice slowly and with awareness.

No movement can be purely sattvic. The inherent nature of movement is rajasic, as rajas is the principal of energy, and movement requires energy. Hence our sattvic qualities are

most nurtured in meditation and in the stillness of holding a pose, where we can find pure awareness.

The rajasic nature of movement does not necessarily make it bad for us. Rajas serves the useful purpose of stimulating our bodies and minds. We could not function in our world without a part of us being rajasic.

### **What Sort of Yoga is Right for You?**

When determining the kind of yoga practice that is right for you, the most important factor is your vikruti, or imbalance. Your vikruti is, in fact, the single most important determinant of your entire regime. Once you have corrected your imbalance, you can stay in good health by choosing a yoga practice that balances your constitution, or prakruti. (It's sometimes hard for the layperson to distinguish between characteristics that are inborn, or constitutional, and those that result from an imbalance. For best results, consult a trained Ayurvedic physician.)

People of Vata constitution or imbalance are most supported by a yoga practice that is calming, quieting, and yet warming. People of pitta nature or imbalance are most supported by a yoga practice that is calming, quieting, and cooling. And people of kapha nature or imbalance are most supported by a yoga practice that is stimulating and warming. Each individual has different needs. To practice in a way that does not support you is to invite greater imbalance.

### **Asanas for Vata**

The Asanas, which are most suitable for balancing vata, are those that are calming and grounding by nature. They will counter the tendency for those with a vata imbalance to be "spacey," agitated, or nervous. These asanas will help allay fear, worry, and anxiety and also improve vata physical imbalances such as constipation, lower back pain, and joint pains. The lower abdomen, pelvis, and large intestine are the main residence of vata in the body, so many of these asanas compress the lower abdomen or cause the lower abdomen to become taut. In addition, asanas that strengthen the lower back help alleviate vata.

In general, most yoga asanas are good for balancing vata, since most asanas are calming to the mind. There are, however, some that are particularly good and some that should certainly be avoided.

Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) is an exceptional asana for vatas. Stand with your feet about shoulder-width apart. The arms may be raised over the head as you reach to the sky, or you may wish to bend the elbows, clasping the opposing arms just above the elbow and

letting your forearms rest on or just above the crown of your head. Keeping your back straight, slowly bend forward from the hips as you exhale. Bend as far forward as you comfortably can. Your hands may remain crossed, touch the floor in front of your feet, or, if you are very flexible, be clasped just behind your heels. For the less flexible, the hands may be placed on blocks, which rest on the floor. Let gravity assist the lengthening of your spine. All standing asanas tend to be grounding if awareness is placed on the feet, honoring the connection between your body and the Earth.

Note that this asana can put quite a strain on an injured lower back, so care should be used. If the lower back is simply tight, a condition related to aggravated vata, this is an excellent asana. The seated version of this asana, Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend), will have similar value and may be easier if your back is sore.

Balasana (Child's Pose) is another excellent asana for compressing the pelvis and the vata region. Sit upright with your knees flexed and placed underneath your buttocks. Keeping your arms to your side, bend forward from the hips until your head is resting on the floor in front of you. If you do not have the flexibility to place your head on the ground, place a folded blanket or a pillow on the floor in front of you for your head to rest upon. Compression asanas are excellent for constipation and for chronic gas.

Supta Virasana (Reclining Hero Pose) is another good asana for vata. Kneel with your knees together and your buttocks resting on your heels. Move the legs out to the side of the pelvis so that the buttocks slide down in between both legs. Place the hands on the soles of the feet and lean back onto the elbows. This may be enough extension for many people. If you are flexible enough, gradually lower your back down to the floor. Your hands may lie by your side or be stretched above the head to lengthen the spine.

While this stretch does not compress the pelvis, it creates a mild extension of the lower abdominal muscles and lower back. This action increases the pressure in the pelvis, again alleviating vata. According to Ayurvedic doctor Vasant Lad, this asana is particularly useful as a part of treatment for vata-type asthma conditions.

Dhanurasana (Bow Pose) also extends the lower back and places pressure on the pelvis. Lie on your stomach with your arms at your sides. Lift the head, shoulders, and chest off of the mat and bend both knees. Reach back and take hold of the ankles. Let your legs draw your chest farther into the air so that your body weight rests on the pelvic region. This is essential for the maximum relief of vata

Virasana (Hero Pose), Siddhasana (Easy Pose), and Padmasana (Lotus Pose) are very calming poses which sedate vata's agitated nature. These meditative poses are excellent for calming the nervous system, which aids in the healing of anxiety, nervousness, sciatica, and muscle spasm. The most calming pose of all is, of course, the supine Savasana (Corpse Pose).

People of vata nature should avoid asanas that are overly stimulating to the nervous system, such as repetitive Sun Salutations, and those that place excessive pressure on

sensitive joints in the body. The cervicothoracic junction—the bony region where the neck meets the shoulders—is one of these areas. Here, large vertebrae stick out like "sore thumbs." People of vata nature and imbalance tend to have weaker bones, less fatty padding, looser ligaments, and more susceptibility to pain. For these reasons, Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulder stand) and Halasana (Plow Pose) should be avoided or modified by placing a blanket under the shoulders for extra padding. This also decreases the extreme flexion the neck is placed in. Even so, people of vata nature or imbalance should not hold these poses for very long, or they will risk injury.

### **Asanas for Pitta**

The best asanas for pitta are those that are calming and not overly heating. People of pitta nature or imbalance tend to be more assertive and intense. Calming poses help sedate their intensity and ease the emotions of anger and resentment that they are prone to. By alleviating pitta, these asanas are good as part of the treatment for conditions such as ulcers and hyperacidity, liver disease, and acne.

Asanas that help balance pitta are those that place pressure on the naval and solar plexus region, in the small intestine where pitta resides. These asanas directly affect the liver and spleen and help regulate the strength of the digestive fire.

Ustrasana (Camel Pose) is very beneficial for pittas. Kneel with the buttocks lifted as though you were standing on your knees. Place your palms on your buttocks. Move your thighs and pelvis forward as you extend the lower back, bringing your hands to your heels. Gently extend your neck. Remember to breathe. This asana opens up the abdomen, solar plexus, and chest, allowing for freer movement of energy through these regions.

Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose) and Dhanurasana (Bow Pose) are also excellent solar plexus extension poses for pitta. These asanas can play a role in the treatment of ulcers and hepatitis.

To perform Cobra Pose, lie face down with your feet together and ankles extended. Bend the elbows and place your hands flat on the floor by your lower ribs. (Less flexible people may choose to place the palms on the floor at shoulder level.) Upon inhalation, extend the elbows and raise the head, chest, and abdomen off the floor while keeping the pelvic bones on the floor. The head may be held in a neutral position or in extension.

Headstand should be avoided for people of pitta imbalance or constitution. Headstands heat the body, and much of this heat accumulates in the head and the eyes. The eyes are controlled mainly by pitta. For this reason, Headstands can help cause or worsen diseases of the eyes. If a person of pitta constitution with no serious imbalance chooses to do Headstands, then the Headstand should be held for a very short period.

## **Asanas for Kapha**

To balance the heavy, slow, cold, and sedated nature of kapha, practice asanas that are more stimulating and heating. Asanas best suited to individuals of kapha nature or imbalances are those that open up the chest. The stomach and chest are the areas where kapha accumulates. In the chest, kapha takes on the form of mucous. These asanas are excellent for the prevention and treatment of congestive conditions like bronchitis and pneumonia as well as constrictive conditions such as asthma and emphysema.

Ushtrasana (Camel Pose) and Setu Bandha (Bridge Pose) are useful asanas for kapha. To perform Setu Bandha, lie flat on your back with your arms to your sides, with palms facing down toward the floor. Using your elbows and forearms, raise your pelvis off the mat as you keep your shoulders and feet grounded. Try to stay on the tops of your shoulders and increase the height of the pelvis by extending evenly through both legs.

As a gentle alternative to this posture, lie on your back in extension over a bolster and a pillow. Both of these variations do an excellent job of opening the chest, allowing for greater circulation of energy through this region. These asanas also affect the flow of energy through the heart chakra, aiding the development of compassion and unconditional love.

For those of kapha nature and imbalance, the calming and sedating effect of most asanas needs to be balanced by other asanas that are more stimulating and heating. People of kapha nature are the best suited to handle strengthening poses, as their joints and muscles tend to be strong and stable. Increasing flexibility is extremely important for those of kapha nature, as kaphas tend to become overly stiff or rigid.

Suryanamaskar (Sun Salutation) is a very good aerobic exercise for kapha and helps in the treatment of obesity and depression, two common kapha conditions. The Sun Salutation is the ideal asana for kapha, as it is very active, creates heat, and opens the chest.

There are 12 parts to this sequence of poses. Begin by standing erect with the feet touching each other. Bend the elbows and bring the palms together in the middle of the chest. Raise the arms above the head and extend into a slight backbend. Bend forward into Uttanasana and bring the hands to the floor, bending the knees if you need to protect your back. From this position, lunge backward with the right leg as you bend the left knee. The knee of the right leg may lie on the floor. The foot of the left leg should be between both hands.

Bring the left leg backward and place it by the right leg as you lift your buttocks high into the air and come into Adho Mukha Swanasana (Downward-Facing Dog). Allow the elbows to come to the floor and glide your body forward into Bhujangasana (Cobra Pose). Then press back into Downward-Facing Dog. Next, lunge the right leg forward as you bring your pelvis low to the ground. The right foot is placed between the hands and

the knee is bent, held close to the chest. Bring the left foot forward as you return to Uttanasana. Come up to a standing position and raise the arms once again over the head, extending the back and neck. To complete the cycle, return the hands to the chest, palms together.

People of all constitutions can benefit from Sun Salutations during the time of day that is dominated by kapha energy (6:00 to 10:00 a.m. and p.m.), as long as there is not a serious imbalance in pitta or vata. People of kapha nature should do many repetitions and perform them with great speed. While in general people of vata nature should avoid this asana, performing it very slowly and with great awareness will decrease its vata-aggravating tendencies. Pitta types should do limited repetitions, as this series is very heating.

Few asanas are harmful to kapha, as kaphas benefit from all forms of stretching and movement. Two weak areas of the body for kapha individuals, however, are the lungs and the kidneys. Asanas that place excessive pressure on the lower abdomen, such as Dhanurasana (Bow Pose), can aggravate the kidneys if held for too long.

### **Other Factors**

In some ways the prescription I have just given is overly simplistic. In developing a healthy yoga practice, you must take into consideration not only your constitution and imbalance but also your age, the season, and the time of day you are practicing.

At different times of our lives, different doshas play a greater role. This is a part of the natural fluctuation of these forces. From birth through puberty, our bodies and minds are more affected by kapha. From puberty until around our retirement years, the influence of pitta increases. The later years, post retirement, are most dominated by vata.

During each of these periods, we must pay attention to the effect our age has on us and modify our practice appropriately. When we are very young, our bodies can better tolerate the more aerobic styles of yoga. As we age, we need to practice more calming asanas.

The seasons also affect a healthy practice. The season of cold dampness increases kapha. The season of warm weather increases pitta. The season of cool dryness increases vata, as does the windy season. (In different parts of the country these take place at different times, so placing the names of traditional seasons upon them can be misleading.) During the kapha season, a practice that is more stimulating and warming is better. In the pitta season, a practice that is cooling is best. In the vata season, a calming practice supports greater health.

Finally, the time of day we practice will affect the balance of the doshas. Kapha naturally increases between 6:00 and 10:00 a.m. and p.m., when we are moving slowly. Pitta naturally increases between 10:00 and 2:00 a.m. and p.m., when the digestive fire is at its

height and, in the daytime, the sun is at its peak. Vata naturally increases between 2:00 and 6:00 a.m. and p.m., during the transition between night and day.

Most people practice yoga in the early morning, when the world is calm. Before 6:00, during the time of vata, a very quiet and gentle practice is recommended. After 6:00, during the time of kapha, a more stimulating practice is appropriate. Remember, though, that when designing a yoga practice for yourself, your overall vikruti, or imbalance, is more important than the influence of the season, your age, or the time of day. These should be seen as the factors that modify your practice but not the factors that create it. When you are in near perfect balance, you can create a program based almost entirely on your constitution, the seasons, and the time of day.

In Ayurveda, balancing the effects of the doshas is only half of the formula for creating health and well being. The other half is developing a more sattvic lifestyle and learning to express our sattvic nature: that aspect of ourselves that, through an awareness of our connectedness to Spirit, allows us to express our highest or most virtuous qualities.

Yoga, practiced in harmony with each person's unique nature, is part of the Ayurvedic path toward balancing the doshas and enhancing sattva. Through this path each of us can reach our full potential.