

# The Importance of ayurveda



## to yoga practice

*Ayurveda, the sacred knowledge* of life, is an Indian system of medicine which encompasses every aspect of life as a source of either health or disease.

*This 5,000-year-old method of healing has its roots in the Vedas, the ancient Indian scriptures, which are said to be apauruseya or divine in origin. Yoga was similarly first mentioned in the Vedas.*

The theories of both Ayurveda and yoga are based on Samkhya philosophy. Samkhya is the naming and categorizing of information. It is an exploration and analysis of material existence (Prakriti) and pure consciousness (Purusha). Samkhya provides the mind with tangible pieces to compare. One result of this analysis reveals the method, process and aim of yoga and Ayurveda.

The aim of yoga is the dissolution of existence into the cosmic void. Ayurveda on the other hand seeks to perfect life and ensure the health of the mind, the sense organs and the body. Since life is required to engage in yoga practice, Ayurveda is required to maintain the process of yoga. Yoga practice is the continuous effort put forth to attain to the realization of Yoga. Therefore, the achievement of realization through yoga practice is dependent upon the correct application of Ayurveda.

In present-day practice, Ayurveda emphasizes that inherited tendencies, environmental conditions, diet and lifestyle are the main causes of health or disease. The imbalance of these conditions disturbs Agni (Fire), or metabolism and digestion, which increases Ama (toxins) or consumes

the body. An increase of Ama can be categorized into three Ama-Doshas (impurities). Depending upon the type of inherited tendencies, environmental conditions, imbalanced diet and



lifestyle, one of three main types of imbalances will occur.

Disease is due to an imbalance of one or more of the three Doshas (humors or impurities). The three Doshas are Vata (wind), Pitta (bile) and Kapha (phlegm). An aggravation of

each one of these Doshas has a specific effect on the body, which can cause complications in asana practice. An increase of Vata manifests as dryness, weakness and pain in the body, especially in the lower back and extremities. The muscles, tendons and ligaments become tight, the joints crack and the asanas cause pain. A Pitta aggravation causes profuse sweating, burning sensations in the body, skin blemishes as well as anger and frustration. A Kapha imbalance manifests as excess fat, lethargy and depression. The lungs feel heavy and back bends are difficult in the thoracic (upper) spine.

Asana and pranayama practice loosens the Doshas and assists in their removal from the body. Since incorrect diet and lifestyle aggravates the Doshas, it is important to develop dietary and lifestyle habits which encourage the removal and reduction of the future occurrence of excess Dasha in the body.

Some basic dietary recommendations include the avoidance of caffeine, alcohol and nicotine, artificial sweeteners, flavors and preservatives and refined and bleached white sugar and flour. Coffee and tea increase Vata and Pitta.

Caffeine is an addictive substance, which thins the blood and creates the experience of increased flexibility and energy. When the blood is pure it is naturally thin, and when the body is healthy, there is sufficient energy for asana practice. If one is feeling tired, it is best to practise slowly or rest for one day, instead of drinking tea or coffee prior to asana practice, otherwise the body will slowly dry out and strength and vitality will be consumed irreplaceably.

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Healthy vegetarian meals consisting of fruits, vegetables, legumes, nuts, seeds, dairy products, whole grains, herbs and spices, should be consumed during day light hours when digestive fire is strongest. The strength of appetite indicates the strength of the digestive fire. It is therefore important to eat when one is hungry and not to eat when one doesn't have an appetite. Each particle of food which is taken into the body is broken down and separated into use able parts and waste products: the digestive process transforms each particle of food into the seven Dhatus or tissues of the body.

When digestive fire is weak, even healthy foods are turned into fat deposits and toxins in the body. If insufficient nutritious food is consumed, there will be a wasting of the tissues. This can manifest as iron deficiency in the blood, weakness of the muscles, calcium deficiency in the bones, a weakening of the nervous system and eventually an insufficiency of reproductive tissue which leads to infertility and a depletion of Ojas



(vital essence). Over-exercise and over-exertion, which consume tissues faster than the body can replace them, will lead to a similar result.

Abhyanga, the external application of oil, reduces Vata or pain and dryness in the body. Sesame oil can be applied to the entire body on a daily basis, or to specific painful joints or areas of the body. If there is pain or stiffness accompanied by dryness in any of the asanas, regular application of oil to this area quickly reduces pain and dryness. Oil should be applied when digestive fire is strong, since this digestive fire also exists in the skin. Internal oleation is also beneficial, consuming natural

oils and ghee (clarified butter) reduces Vata in the entire body.

To reduce a Pitta aggravation, spicy, salty and sour foods should be avoided and additional milk can be consumed. An increase of Kapha is best reduced by reducing the quantity of food intake and increasing physical and mental activities.

Yoga asana practice reduces and balances the Doshas. The asanas uncover deep-rooted inherited tendencies, impurities and imbalances in the body.

As the impurities are cleared out of the body, the body is capable of moving deeper into the asanas. It is possible to facilitate this process by taking the principles of Ayurveda into consideration and maintaining a healthy diet and lifestyle.