

Yoga and Ayurveda: Two Sides of One Coin

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In our Western culture, many people use Yoga asana as a stretching tool to keep the body limber and agile. To this extent there is no better practice. Traditionally, however, Yoga postures are a part of a much greater spiritual journey. Yoga is a complete science of helping the mind to become clear or pure. A clear mind is not affected by stress and a clear mind produces a healthy body. While the health benefits of a mind at peace are irrefutable, what is even more exciting is that a person with a clear mind is also aware of their deeper spiritual nature or connection. We say in Ayurveda that all disease is the end result of forgetting our spiritual nature. Hence, Ayurveda and Yoga strive to help a person re-connect to their true nature through direct experience.

Yoga and Ayurveda are so closely related they are often looked at as two sides of one coin. In fact, Ayurveda is the healing side of Yoga, and Yoga is the spiritual side of Ayurveda. Together they encompass a complete approach to the well being of the body, the mind, and the spirit.

With even a little knowledge of Ayurveda, the practitioner of Hatha Yoga can refine their practice so that it is in harmony with their internal balance of energy. As with diet, herbs, aromas, etc., some Yoga postures are best for one person while others can cause greater imbalance. Knowledge of one's constitutional balance (a balance between, what is known in Ayurveda, as the Vata, Pitta, and Kapha doshas) can allow the Yoga practitioner to use asanas to improve their health and well being.

Those people with an imbalance in Vata dosha tend to experience greater lightness, coldness, and mobility. They may suffer from weight loss, immune weakness, constipation, cold hands and feet, and anxiety or nervousness. For these people, calming and grounding yoga poses are best. Standing postures such the tree pose (Vrksasana) and mountain pose (Tadasana) root the feet into the ground and reduce anxiety and nervousness. Poses which compress the pelvis such as seated forward bends (Pascimottanasana) aid in reducing constipation while strength poses such as the crane (Bakasana) aid circulation. Fast-paced poses such as repetitive sun salutations (Surya Nanaskar) performed rapidly, for example, may increase nervousness over time and poses performed without attention to detail in position may injure the joints. While the proper poses bring about balance, improper poses can cause greater imbalance.

Those people with an imbalance in the Pitta dosha tend to suffer from excess heat in their bodies. They feel warm and may have a multitude of skin conditions such as acne or psoriasis. They may also suffer from diarrhea, burning eyes, and liver weakness.

Calming and cooling poses which compress the solar plexus help balance them, while poses which extend the solar plexus help dissipate heat in the body. Poses such as the cobra (Bhujangasana) and the bow (Dhanurasana) are examples of poses which dissipate excess heat. Those people of pitta imbalance need to avoid overheating themselves with their Yoga practice. Aerobic forms of Yoga causing profuse sweating should be avoided as should inverted poses which increase the heat in the head. Those with a Kapha imbalance tend to experience excess heaviness, sluggishness, coldness, and dampness in their body. They suffer from congestion, weight gain, and lethargy. Stimulating, heating forms of Yoga suit their needs well. Aerobic forms are recommended though they should begin slowly and work their way up in aggressiveness. The sun salutation, as the name suggests is quite heating and performed with repetition, is perhaps the best Yoga sequence for Kapha imbalance. Its aerobic nature alleviates lethargy and assists with weight loss. Poses which extend or open the chest reduce congestion and aid breathing. These include the upward bow pose (Urdhva Dhanura) and the bridge pose (Setu Bandha Sarvangasana). While meditative poses can be performed by those of Kapha nature or imbalance, they must always be balanced with active postures to avoid an increase in lethargy.

Yoga poses themselves are not a complete healing program. They are a part of a complete regimen for balancing the body and mind utilizing all of the components of Ayurveda. This includes proper diet, herbs, aromatherapy, color therapy, sound therapy, meditation, detoxification, rejuvenation and creating a harmonious lifestyle. The individual who follows an Ayurvedic program is assured of creating an optimal environment in their body for healing to take place. In an optimal environment, the body can reach its greatest potential. We say in Ayurveda that where there is harmony there is health, where there is disharmony there is disease. Ayurveda and Yoga combine to lead a person on the path to perfect harmony and optimal health. Patanjali, author of the Yoga Sutras, laid out the path for using Yoga as a guide to enlightenment. He said: "We must proceed gradually through all of the steps of yoga practice." Yoga postures are just one step of the process of preparing the body to be able to manage both the increase and the heightening of energy that occurs with spiritual practice. Asanas, along with proper lifestyle (including proper diet, disciplines, and restraints), are the foundations upon which spiritual growth can occur. Once the proper foundation has been achieved, the deeper practices can begin.

Both Yoga and Ayurveda incorporate meditation and breathing techniques in their practices. Meditation as a tool can be used both for healing as well as for spiritual awareness. While Ayurvedic techniques focus on the healing component of meditation, Yoga focuses on its spiritual components. Regardless of one's focus, meditation clears the mind and relaxes the body resulting in both healing and spiritual awareness. There are many forms of meditation which act like tools helping the practitioner to achieve their desired end result. While some individuals resonate with one particular type more

than others, for the most part meditative techniques are tools and all of them have value for the right person.

Healing ourselves with Yoga and Ayurveda is indeed a journey. It is not a quick fix or a magic pill. It heals us at the core of our nature, in essence, through the transformation of consciousness. It is a discipline in harmony with all of nature. As we practice, we grow and evolve as people.

Stress is reduced, harmful emotions dissipate, sorrow is no longer, joy and peace return to our lives. Our internal energy builds and our eyes shine radiating the light that is life itself.

"Who burns with the bliss and suffers the sorrow of every creature within his own heart, making his own each bliss and each sorrow. Him I hold highest of the yogis."
Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Prabhavanada.

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