

Using Ayurvedic Principles and Yogasanas for optimal health in body and mind

Ayurveda is the sister science to Yoga; and actually, one does not exist without the other. Ayurveda provides the pathway to optimal health by holistically treating ailments, diseases and discomforts by balancing our diet, routine, exercise and lifestyle according to our own personal constitution. Ayurveda aims our attention inward, first at the outer body, then the tissues and organs, the central digestive tract which provides the pathway for eliminating toxin and finally into the subtle and casual body where the seeds of our existence are located. And once here we can continue our Yoga practice of chanting, prayer, jhana, raja, and karma yoga to finally merge with that force of creation. Ayurveda relies on Yoga's understanding of the mind and our Divine consciousness to create a program specific to our deeper selves. Our work with our bodies is considered Divine work. And with knowledge of Ayurveda as the healing practice of Yoga, we can truly begin our healing and transformation.

Ayurveda claims that all diseases come from two causes, poor physical and mental digestion and our karma. First, if the body is not capable of processing all the foods it intakes, the excess undigested food will collect in certain organs of the digestive system. Once this happens toxins will travel from this internal tract into the outer and central pathways. The outer pathway includes the blood and skin, the two superficial tissues and the central pathway includes the deeper tissues and organs. Once the disease or toxin enters the central pathway, treatment and healing is more difficult since the issue is now deep seated. The goal of the Ayurvedic process is to bring the toxin back from the outer and central pathways into the inner one, within the digestive tract, so the toxins can be eliminated properly. The forms of treatment that move the toxin along these pathways includes prayer, medication, chanting, oleation (oil massages and using oils internally,) sweating, changing of diet and lifestyle and using specific herbs to treat specific diseases and ailments.

In order to eliminate various toxins called *ama*, or unprocessed food mass that turns into toxin in the system, we must strengthen our *agni*, or digestive fire.

“Most diseases arise from poor or wrong functioning of the digestive system. The digestive fire, Agni, is central to health. It is not only responsible for absorbing nutrients in food, but it also destroys any pathogens and renders the food acceptable to our systems. Undigested food becomes like a pathogen in the body, breeding toxins and upsetting the immune system. . . . When Agni is normal there is good digestion, circulation and complexion; pleasant breath and body odor; adequate energy and strong resistance to disease. When Agni is abnormal there is poor digestion, poor circulation, bad complexion; offensive body odor, intestinal gas, constipation; low energy and poor resistance to disease.” (*Ayurvedic Healing* p. 136)

And according to Ayurvedic principles we increase our Agni by detoxification, tonification, adding certain herbs to our diet, eating a diet specific to our constitution, practicing daily prayer, meditation, pranayama and adding certain sets of asanas specific to our needs. In our modern practice asanas are taught according to how they flow in

sequence, or if we're lucky we have a teacher that understands how a certain sequence will open the heart, increase internal heat and stimulate the digestive fluids, or work on back issues. As this is a teacher training program as well as a Yoga study, let's become the teachers who use asanas appropriately, for their greatest good and original benefit. (This does not mean we don't teach for a modern audience and their needs; we simply educate ourselves to understand and teach to the original purpose of Hatha Yoga.)

Our ability to understand what we experience is determined by the strength of our mental digestive fire. As I stated above disease is also caused by poor mental health, or mental indigestion!

Dr. Frawley writes of mental digestion:

The mind, like the body, has its digestive power of digestive fire, Agni, which is intelligence, Buddhi. . . The mind exists to provide experience and liberation for the soul. Experience that we have digested or understood brings freedom and allows for the expansion of awareness, just as food we have digested releases energy that allows us to work. Experience that we have not digested becomes a toxin and initiates various pathological changes in the mind, just as undigested food causes the disease process in the physical body. Just as well-digested food brings physical happiness and undigested food causes disease, so well-digested experience causes mental disorders. (*Ayurveda and the Mind* p. 172)

This means we have the power to change both our bodies and minds with practice. If our practice inherently includes stoking the mental and physical fires, the process of digestion within the body and our ability to gain insight and wisdom from our experiences will become stronger. Your healing is in your hands!! What a gift, a treasure of freedom. Maybe we still rely on doctors for certain diseases and on teachers for spiritual direction, but ultimately, our well being is up to us!

The second cause of disease is our karma (action). Our health depends on our actions and choices we make in life. Ayurveda teaches that, “. . . disease can arise from karmic causes—from the effects of wrong actions . . . meaning from psychological or spiritual causes. These wrong actions include not only moral failings but also wrong occupation, problems in relationship or emotional difficulties. The treatment may require changes in life-style and attitudes. Such causes include not living up to our spiritual purpose or in life, not following our ‘dharma’.” (*Ayurvedic Healing* p. 55)

So the fun part begins! Let's think about all the ways we add stress to our own lives. How many times do we blame others for the way we feel, think or act? In our daily routine, what is essential for our well being and happiness and what do we decide that fuels our self-centered perceptions, fans the flame of our desires and ignorance? **Put another way; how much of our life is compassionately chosen vs. done in haste to fulfill harmful or destructive desires?** Yoga is the tool with which we become aware of these questions, let alone begin to search for answers. I'm not interested in your answers, but that you have the tools to search. So look at your list of worries, stresses, desires, grief, stories, quarrels, headaches, pleasures, sorrows and now look at your health. Is anything related? Is there a connection between your choices and their

outcomes and your physical and mental well-being? Look at the positive side of this question; when you feel fulfilled, content, happy, rested, relaxed, rejuvenated how is your health? Is anything related? Is there a connection between these experiences and outlooks and your physical and mental well-being? It would seem obvious, but most of us live in reaction to the outer world and then wonder why we don't sleep well, have headaches, backaches, indigestion, etc. This is the karmic side of disease and should be considered when exploring the connection to health, vitality, life style and daily choices. And as teachers, when a student comes with a concern of acid reflux we don't immediately give a pose to reduce build up. With an Ayurvedic understanding of the causes of disease we can now take into consideration other factors besides the physical when helping someone relieve their suffering. (Karma also discusses how our actions in former lives also affect our health now. This will be covered in more detail later in the year.)

So a whole perspective of disease and healing includes looking at all aspects of life, from diet and nutrition, exercise and rest, sexual activity and self control, work and play, physical and mental attributes of the body and mind, communication, etc. We must have this understanding of whole health before offering the asanas as a method or therapy for treating disease, discomforts and ailments.