

Using Yoga for Healing: The Ayurvedic Basis of Hatha Yoga Practices

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Among the millions of practitioners of Hatha Yoga in the world today, relatively few are aware that its practices are based in the principles of India's ancient natural health care system, Ayurvedic medicine. Prior to the colonial era in India, six main systems of Yoga (*Jnana*, *Tantra*, *Karma*, classical *Ashtanga* as described by Patanjali, *Hatha*, and *Bhakti*) seem to have existed, each quite diverse and each having been more popular during some historical eras and in some localities than in others, though all shared the goal of union with the Divine, and the promise of the resulting inner peace and joy.

Hatha Yoga was the next to the last of these six systems to develop fully, and its major texts, including the *Yoga Yajnavalkya*, the *Goraksa Shataka*, the *Hatha Pradipika*, the *Gherandha Samhita*, and the *Shiva Samhita*, were likely composed well into the common era and prior to the British empire's two-century economic and political domination of India beginning in the mid-eighteenth century. Although the other branches of the pre-colonial Yoga tree mainly concerned themselves with the mental and spiritual well-being of the human, *Hatha Yoga* was unique in its attention to the physical body and its health. A longer and healthier life, it is argued, increases the chances of achieving enlightenment during this lifetime.

The pre-colonial Yogic understanding of the make-up of the physical body was not based upon western medicine concepts as it is in modern Yoga Therapy, however, but upon Ayurveda's concepts of human anatomy and physiology, the central role of digestion in health, and the balance of bio-energies called *doshas*. Yoga practices were not simply to be mastered by adherents of the Hatha Yoga path as a discipline leading to liberation; they were also to be used to strengthen the digestion and overall vitality of the physical body, to balance the *doshas*, to extend the lifespan, to cleanse the channels of the body, and to prevent and even cure certain illnesses (e.g., HP I-31, III-16, V-13). In developing Hatha Yoga's systems of *asanas* (the movements and postures that Yoga is best known for in the West), cleansing practices (*shat kriya*), *pranayama* (breath practices), and *mudras* (a set of specific physical movements practiced for both energetic and physiological effects), Hatha Yogis relied on Ayurvedic principles as well as those of Tantra.

Ayurveda is considered to be the oldest continuously practiced medical system in the world, and is today a government-supported health care system in both India and Nepal. The sacred nature of healing plants, as well as the practice of combining them in formulas for individual patients, is mentioned in the earliest of the four Vedas, the *Rg*.

But use of the term “Ayurveda” (systematic knowledge of the processes of life) appears to have come much later. Although dating of ancient Indian texts is generally problematic, it is likely that the earliest developed medical texts we have today were written sometime after 200 BCE.

Yet seen through the lens of modern biological research, it is extraordinary what these early healers were able to deduce through their keen observations of nature, the process of trial and error, and what they intuited through observation and meditation. Throughout Ayurveda’s history, for example, its physicians have asserted a connection between the health of the digestion and 1) the health of the mind, and 2) the health of *ojas* (immunity/resilience). In the last decade, these relationships have been validated through research on the roles of healthy gut bacteria in both mental health and in the function of the mammalian immune system (e.g., Luria, 2015). In addition, a voluminous body of research on properties of a number of selected Ayurvedic herbs has revealed that they often do have the medicinal effects claimed by the ancient Ayurvedic pharmacists.

And although some initiated Hatha Yoga married practitioners and renunciates in India appear to have learned the uses of local medicinal plants in order to help those living near them, Yogis who wrote the texts did not discuss in any detail the sophisticated system of Ayurvedic herbal medicine. But they used almost every other branch of the Ayurveda system. From the Ayurvedic *Pancha Karma* system of herbal internal body cleansings they developed a parallel system of salt water cleansings called *shat karma*, of which *neti*, for cleansing and opening the sinuses, is the simplest and most familiar to North American Yoga students. Oil massage and hot baths, standard Ayurvedic health care practices, were recommended for some conditions. (HP V-8).

Hatha Yogis gave dietary and lifestyle advice to enhance the digestive fire, one’s overall health, and one’s daily Yoga practice (“Take your first meal at noon and your second meal after the sun goes down.” (GS: V-32). Over-eating was forbidden, certain foods were to be avoided, and practitioners were advised to avoid extreme austerities and napping during the daytime hours. A number of practices which enhance digestion and elimination were developed, such as the mudras *agni sar dhauti* and *asvini mudra*. These were complemented with certain twists to aid elimination and backbends such as bow and wheel to enhance digestion. Hatha yogis also used specific breath practices to balance emotions.

Teachers in Hatha Yoga lineages identified which asanas and pranayamas should be done by which students, based on both the person’s own Ayurvedic constitution (*prakrti*) as well as any current imbalances and health issues (*vikrti*).

How did they do this? To vastly oversimplify, Ayurveda accepted from a pre-existing philosophical system called Samkhya the idea that energy can exist in five states of matter: solid, liquid, luminous/combustive, gaseous, and pure space. In living systems, these five form three bio-energies called doshas: *vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*, all of which play essential roles in living systems.

Vata dosha is the movement principle, which all living beings possess in some form or another, even, if for some, it is mostly intracellular in nature. In humans, this principle expresses itself through thought, speech, breath, creativity, movement of substances within the body, musculoskeletal movement, and the movement of *prana*. *Vata* is said to be cold, dry, expansive, and changeable. Excessive *vata*, caused by climate, seasonal changes, inappropriate lifestyle or dietary choices, over-exercise, illnesses, stress, physical and emotional traumas, etc., can manifest in the form of a variety of different conditions such as insomnia, anxiety disorders, tissue depletion, and osteoarthritis.

Pitta dosha, the metabolic principle, governs body warmth and all digestive and metabolic functions, the mental functions of concentration and rational process, and desires for discovery and achievement. Its nature is said to be hot, oily, and penetrating. Excessive *pitta*, caused by climate, seasonal changes, inappropriate lifestyle or dietary choices, pressures to compete and succeed, etc., can manifest as a variety of conditions which include, for example, irritability, frustration, workaholic tendencies, anger, some types of allergies, and almost all inflammatory diseases.

Kapha dosha, the structural principle, allows for the existence of physical bodies of living organisms, be they simple or complex, composed of various organs, tissues, and systems. *Kapha* is described as cool and wet, liquid or solid, stable and retentive, and expresses itself in humans as strength, emotional stability, reliability, memory, and organizational ability. Its excesses, caused by climate, seasonal changes, inappropriate lifestyle or dietary choices, physical and mental inactivity; include, for example, such conditions as benign tumors, excessive body tissues, edema, excessive mucus, clogged body channels, lethargy, denial, and some types of depression. Many illnesses, of course, result from combinations of more than one *dosha*.

Many of the Hatha Yoga *pranayama* and *mudra* practices were designed with an understanding of their doshic effects as well as their capabilities for deepening meditation, and were individually taught. For example, the breath practices *ujjayi* and *kappalabhati*, which increase *pitta* and decrease *kapha* were often recommended for use during the cold and wet seasons, or as treatments for people with conditions of excess *kapha*. *Sitali*, *sitkari*, and *kaki muda*, on the other hand, were designed to be practiced in

hot weather or to help to resolve conditions of pitta such as anger and hyperacidity. Proper practice of pranayama can alleviate some diseases, while, we are warned, improper practice can create them (HP II-16).

Practicing asanas slowly, timing each movement with an extended inhalation or exhalation, is highly effective for calming *vata*, while more active and heating poses are recommended for resolution of *kapha* –related conditions. Thus all Hatha Yoga practices were not designed for all people in all circumstances of life, and understanding Ayurvedic principles will help Hatha Yoga practitioners to derive greater benefits from their practices.

Finally, Hatha Yoga practices which have therapeutic value can be compatibly combined with Ayurvedic herbal therapies and other Ayurvedic treatments. In many cases of autoimmune musculo-skeletal disorders, allergies and other respiratory conditions, digestive disorders, and anxiety and depression, for example, health issues often seem to resolve much more quickly and completely when the two therapies are combined. Or, as is said in the concluding fifth chapter of the Hatha Pradipika (22):

“In all diseases, a yogic patient should carefully take treatment according to the methods prescribed by Ayurvedic medicine, and also avail of Yogic treatment.”

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