The Yoga Tradition

Ayurvedic Yoga Therapy: An Overview with Case Study

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Abstract: Ayurvedic Yoga therapy is the application of the eight limbs of Yoga to the healing process. The Ayurvedic paradigm is based on three fundamental concepts: (1) The nature of the patient must be known. (2) The nature of the imbalance or disease must be known. (3) The nature of the remedy must be known. Ayurvedic Yoga therapy is unique in the field of Yoga therapy in that it uses the traditional language and knowledge of Vedic healing to describe and determine the process of healing. This article describes how the eight limbs of Yoga may be applied to healing according to the Ayurvedic paradigm. A case study of low back pain to demonstrate how these general principles may be applied to an individual.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Yoga, chronic pain, back pain

What is Ayurvedic Yoga Therapy?

Ayurvedic Yoga therapy is the application of the eight limbs of Yoga to the healing process. As sister Vedic sciences, Ayurveda is the healing side of Yoga, and Yoga is the spiritual side of Ayurveda. Together, they are a complete path toward the well-being of body, mind, and consciousness.

Ayurveda is much like a large umbrella. It is a paradigm and not a modality. As such, all other modalities can fit under its umbrella. Those that originate within the Vedic teaching and share similar language fit most easily. Ayurveda utilizes the modalities of diet, herbs, color therapy, aroma therapy, sound and mantra therapy, massage therapy, lifestyle therapy, and also Yoga therapy.

The Ayurvedic paradigm is based on three fundamental concepts: (1) The nature of the patient must be known. (2) The nature of the imbalance or disease must be known. (3) The nature of the remedy must be known. Each Yoga practice, in addition to facilitating spiritual development, is also a potential remedy for the body and mind. Knowing how to use a Yoga practice as therapy requires an understanding of these three fundamental concepts.

In the Ayurvedic paradigm, the nature of a person, a disease, or a remedy (practice) is defined by its unique set of qualities. These qualities are listed as ten pairs of opposites: hot/cold, heavy/light, moist/dry, stable/mobile, sharp/dull, smooth/rough, clear/cloudy, dense/flowing, gross/subtle, and hard/soft. When a Yoga therapy is practiced, it influences specific qualities within the body or mind. When practiced therapeutically and properly, these qualities provide an antidote to the qualities of the disease. In this way, the practice supports the healing process.

The Yoga modalities that fall within the scope of Ayurvedic Yoga therapy include all of the practices that fall within the scope of the eight limbs of Yoga as articulated by Sri Patanjali, as well as the more esoteric practices outlined in the Hatha Yoga Pradipaka of Swami Svatmarama. Thus, Ayurvedic Yoga therapy incorporates proper conduct and lifestyle, postures, breathing practices, sensory control, and meditation. It can also include the use of mudras, mantras, bandhas, and yantras.

The difference between Ayurvedic Yoga therapy and traditional Yoga practice is the focus, application, and intention of practice. Ayurvedic Yoga therapy is unique in the field of Yoga therapy in that it uses the traditional language and knowledge of Vedic healing to describe and determine the process of healing. This is the language of the doshas, sub-doshas, dhatus, srotas, agni, ama, and malas in relationship to prakruti and vikruti. There is also a traditional Vedic understanding of the nidana (etiology) and samprapti (pathology). Based upon this understanding, the proper treatment reveals itself.
Ayurvedic Pathology and the Role of Yoga

The Ayurvedic understanding of the pathology of disease and the Yogic understanding of the cause of suffering both teach that disease and suffering begin when we forget our true nature as spirit. This results in disturbances (vrittis) within the mind. Emotionally, these disturbances generate both the joy and sorrow that are experienced. Physically, these disturbances cause an individual to live life as if sensory pleasure and ego-gratification were its main goal.

By forgetting one’s true nature as spirit, an individual comes to see him- or herself only as a physical being. Without a higher connection and purpose, the senses are used for indulgences in the pleasures of life while the organs of action are utilized for the pursuits of the ego rather than for pure service. Sensory indulgence, an unhealthy lifestyle, and engaging the dramas of the world are the immediate causes of both physical and emotional suffering and disease.

Ayurvedic Yoga therapy is based on the idea that the body heals itself when each of its energetic systems is working properly. For these systems to work properly, there must be a strong divine connection, and harmony must exist with the environment through the proper use of the five senses. Without this connection, complete healing is not possible.

Prânic disturbances within body, mind, and consciousness reveal themselves as the symptoms of disease. To understand the nature a disease, Ayurvedic Yoga therapy takes into consideration imbalances in the ten pairs of opposite qualities and imbalances within the five vayus (the five directions of prâna flow).

To eradicate suffering and disease, Ayurvedic therapies focus on restoring the health of the doshas and their subtle counterparts (prâna, tejas, and ojas) through the proper use of the senses, lifestyle, and herbs. The Ayurvedic paradigm also states that the cause of disease must also be addressed, and it is Yoga that focuses on removing the primordial cause of disease. This is why Ayurveda and Yoga are part-and-parcel of a greater whole.

The Yoga in Ayurvedic Yoga Therapy

Yamas and Niyamas in the Healing Process

The yamas and niyamas of Yoga are the foundation of Yoga therapy. Complete healing is simply not possible without a proper lifestyle and proper conduct. An unhealthy lifestyle and improper conduct create stresses that aggravate the doshas, causing them to disturb the body and mind. By living a lifestyle in accordance with the yamas and niyamas, the vrittis of the mind are reduced, stress is reduced, and the doshas stay settled.

Âsana as Yoga Therapy

While some teachers of Yoga therapy incorporate the eight limbs of Yoga, the five koshas, and the healing of consciousness into their paradigm of the healing process, other teachers have tended to focus on âsana as their main modality of healing. The techniques and language used to describe the healing approach are most often borrowed from the Western healing disciplines of medicine, physical therapy, chiropractic, and osteopathy. These models tend to focus on the effects of âsana on musculoskeletal physiology, biomechanics, biochemistry, and the functioning of the nervous system, the cardiovascular system, and the endocrine system.

For example, from the perspective of the Western medical paradigm, an âsana such as matsyendrâsana (fish pose) might be described in terms of improving venous return and cardiac output, and therefore potentially beneficial for patients with congestive heart failure. In contrast, from the Ayurvedic paradigm, this âsana would be described in terms of raising prâna and tejas, improving the flow of udana and vyana vayu, and reducing obstructions created by avalambaka kapha, a sub-dosha of kapha that obstructs flow in the respiratory system and heart.

This language explains why from an Ayurvedic perspective matsyendrâsana improves cardiac function. But it also goes much further than the Western medical explanation. An understanding of the Ayurvedic language reveals deeper uses of the âsana for both physical and psychological conditions. From the perspective of Ayurvedic Yoga therapy, matsyendrâsana is also beneficial for respiratory conditions and for combating lethargy and mild depression.

The greatest challenge with Western Yoga therapy is that Western teachers have tended to focus on the physical and psychological conditions. From the perspective of Ayurvedic Yoga therapy, matsyendrâsana (fish pose) is also beneficial for respiratory conditions and for combating lethargy and mild depression.

It should always be remembered that the deeper healing of an âsana practice comes about through the cultivation of deep internal awareness, the release of blockages to the flow of prâna, the pacification of vitiated doshas, and the restoration of balance to the flow of the five vayus. Âsana, when performed properly, also brings balance to the subtle doshas (prâna tejas, and ojas) and supports the healing of the dhatus.

Because of the detail that understanding Ayurveda provides, the same âsana may be practiced differently (or not...
Pratyâhâra in the Healing Process

Breath is the bridge between the body and the mind. When the breath is disturbed, the flow of prâna is also disturbed, and this causes imbalances in the body and mind. There is no suffering without an alteration in the breath. The practices of prânâyâma affect the physical and subtle bodies. Within the subtle body, Yogic breathing practices purify the subtle channels (called nâdîs) and balance the flow of prâna through them. The end result creates stillness in the mind and assists the awakening and flow of kundalini shakti, leading to greater spiritual awareness.

In the physical body, various types of prânâyâma affect the flow of prâna (life energy) to the tissues and organs of the body. For example, prânâyâma practices directly influence the health of the respiratory system (prânâvaha srotâ), making it an important practice in the management of asthma, chronic bronchitis, and respiratory allergies. Some forms of prânâyâma also directly influence the functioning of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems (majjâvaha srotâ). Ayurvedic Yoga Therapy, understanding the nature (qualities) of an imbalance, and the nature (qualities) of the various breathing practices, prescribes prânâyâma to normalize the flow of prâna through the nâdîs and pacify the affected doshas.

Pratyâhâra in the Healing Process

Pratyâhâra is the restraint and control of the senses. The misuse of the senses has already been described as a major cause of disease. The practices of pratyâhâra seal the senses and prepare the mind for deeper meditation. Creating a deep sense of stillness, pratyâhâra helps to normalize the flow of prâna. Pratyâhâra techniques are powerful methods of pacifying the vata dosha. In the mind, pratyâhâra deepens the experience of stillness that has been cultivated through lifestyle, āsana, and prânâyâma. As truth is realized, the practices of pratyâhâra help to retain the realizations gained. In

Meditation in the Healing Process

The practices of dhârâna (focus) and dhyâna (sustaining one’s focus) are the basis of meditation. Meditation is the most developed aspect of Yoga. Living a proper lifestyle, performing āsana and prânâyâma, and practicing pratyâhâra are preparation for genuine meditation. Each practice creates greater stillness in the mind. As the disturbances of the mind are eradicated, realizations emerge and truth reveals itself. While many of the health benefits of meditation have been studied through scientific research, the greatest benefit of meditation comes from the deep stillness that is attained. In this state, consciousness is clear and pure, and the separation between the seer and seen disappears. Samâdhi (one-ness) is the fruit of meditation practice. Tasting the fruit of samâdhi, an individual realizes his or her true divine nature and removes the primordial cause of disease. Filled with bliss and inner peace, there is no struggle, there is no stress. There is no suffering. There is no disease. If disease was present before, the healing potential of the body is maximized. As the highest states of samâdhi are attained, the Yogi rests in divine awareness.

Ayurvedic Yoga Therapy in Practice: The Management of a Patient with Chronic Low Back Pain

The following case history is a composite of many patients created for the purpose of adequately demonstrating the principles of Ayurvedic Yoga therapy and how they fit within the broader picture of individualized patient care.

A Brief Patient History

Complaints

Mary is a 32-year-old female presenting with low back pain, which has been present on-and-off for two years. The current episode has been present for six weeks. On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the highest rating for pain, Mary describes her pain as a 9, and uses the words “terrible” and “the worst” in describing her situation. Upon further discussion, she states that the pain can vary daily, and it does not significantly interfere with her ability to work or manage the daily activities of life. However, the pain frequently inter-
ferees with her ability to sleep. Secondary complaints include constipation, gas, and bloating. The gas has little odor. She also experiences ongoing anxiety, which she rates a 5.

**Lifestyle**

Mary’s diet includes lots of raw salads, and she snacks regularly on popcorn or dry pretzels. She avoids flour, nuts, and oils, stating that she does not digest them well. She has occasional fruit smoothies prepared with ice. She has chicken or fish 3–4 times per week with some rice. She drinks 1–2 cups of coffee each day. Mary goes to bed at 12:00 AM and awakens for work at 6:00 AM. She works a 9:00 AM to 5:30 PM schedule and takes 30 minutes for lunch, which she eats at her desk. Mary takes an evening aerobics class three evenings per week when her back does not hurt too much. She uses her iPod often, and listens to high-energy rock-and-roll music.

**Life Circumstances**

Mary never had back pain as a young adult. She went through a divorce about two years ago. Shortly after the divorce, her mother passed away from cancer, and Mary has been grieving since. Six weeks ago, she had a fight with her boyfriend, and the future of the relationship is uncertain. Mary works as a receptionist and is very unhappy at her job. She states that her employer asks too much of her, and she often feels overwhelmed by the job. She has been working at this job for six months.

**Spiritual Life**

Mary goes to church 1–2 Sundays each month. She generally believes in the Judeo-Christian idea of God, but she does not consider herself to be religious. She does not have any daily spiritual practices.

**Practitioner Examination**

**Prakruti (The nature of the patient)**

The patient has a narrow face, small eyes, narrow nose, and coarse, dry hair. She has a long neck, minimal musculature, and long, narrow bones. Her tongue is narrow and dark with little or no coating. Examination of the patient’s deep pulse reveals a low to moderate amplitude with a sharp crest. The rate is 80 beats per minute. There are no irregularities.

**Vikruti (The nature of the imbalance and the chief complaint)**

Palpation of the lower back reveals that the area around the injury is cold, and there is no swelling. There is bilateral muscular spasm, which becomes very painful with mild pressure. Range of motion is restricted by the pain and spasm in both flexion and extension. Rotation and lateral bending appear to be within normal limits.

Additional evaluation reveals tenderness throughout the abdomen, particularly in the lower-left quadrant, and the abdominal wall is hard. Mild hair-loss is noted, and the patient’s skin is dry. The patient’s weight is light, and she appears 5–10 pounds below normal for her size and frame. Examination of the patient’s superficial pulse reveals low amplitude and sharp crest, and it occasionally skips a beat. This occurs without a regular pattern. The rate is 80 bpm.

Mary’s breath is shallow and faster than normal. Her breath is moved primarily by the intercostal muscles, particularly those of the upper ribcage.

**A Brief Discussion of the Diagnosis**

The patient has a vata prakruti (constitution) and a vata vikruti (imbalance). Vata dosha has cold, dry, light, and mobile qualities in addition to being sharp, subtle, clear, rough, flowing, and hard.

Diagnosis of the prakruti (constitution) is based on signs that do not readily change, such as body structure and long-term imbalances. In this case, the patient’s body structure is typical of a person with vata constitution. The light quality is observable in her narrow bones and minimal musculature. The subtle qualities are observed in her small eyes and difficult-to-palpate deeper pulse. The mobile quality is observed in the fast pace of her pulse, as well as its irregularities.

The diagnosis of the vikruti (imbalance) is based on signs of dysfunction. In this case, the chief complaint of low back pain has the qualities of being cold and hard, as demonstrated by the skin and surrounding musculature, respectively. As there is no swelling, the condition is dry. Systemic dryness is also noted in the skin. Restricted mobility (range of motion) is common in vata-type conditions that become dry and hard. This lack of mobility is reactive and is not inherent to the imbalance. Excessive mobility is observable as anxiety within the patient’s mind and in the fast pace and irregularity of the superficial pulse. Secondary signs of vata imbalance are also present and include constipation and hair loss, as well as anxiety. These conditions share similar vata qualities and arise from the same roots of the dysfunction.

**A Brief Discussion of the Cause**

The nidana is the cause of the condition, and the cause must be removed for healing to take place. There are many levels to nidana. Nidana can always be traced back to forgetting one’s true nature as spirit and the vrittis that result.
Distraction from the true Self results in the misuse of the senses, a disharmonious lifestyle, and getting caught up in the dramas of the world.

Mary’s spiritual life is also contributing to her low back pain. Her lack of a deep connection to the divine results in her being distracted by the dramas in her life. Mary’s life is swirling in drama. Her mind is preoccupied with the trauma of her mother’s passing, her physical pain, and the discontent she feels in her relationship and her job. As a result of these stresses, Mary is misusing her senses and taking in foods, such as dry popcorn, cold smoothies, cold and light salads, and coffee, that increase the disturbed qualities (increase the dry and mobile qualities). Mary also goes to sleep quite late and does not get enough sleep. This habit reduces the stable quality and the healing that comes with proper rest.

Mary’s life circumstances have also contributed to her low back pain. Vata becomes disturbed (vitiated) in an environment of instability. The loss of her mother combined with the ending of her relationship is a strong factor in creating vata disturbance. Loss increases the qualities of space, or the ether element. Air fills that space, creating dryness and agitation. The result is a vata imbalance.

While the origin of the imbalance is described above, Ayurveda teaches that the unfolding of the imbalance (samskara) begins in the digestive system. In the large intestine, vata dosha becomes disturbed and then overflows into circulation and is distributed to the weak, injured, or susceptible parts of the body. In Mary’s case, the dosha settled into her lower back, as well as her skin, hair, and further into her digestive system.

**Treatment Plan**

A complete treatment plan must not only address the site of the chief complaint but also the root causes and their secondary manifestations. Some parts of this plan will be carried out by an Ayurvedic practitioner. Other parts will be carried out by a Yoga therapist who works with a practitioner trained in Ayurvedic Yoga therapy.

Below is a discussion of many of the modalities that participate in a complete Ayurvedic plan to support the healing of the patient. Additional modalities could certainly be added. For the purposes of this article, special emphasis is placed on therapies performed by the Ayurvedic Yoga therapist.

**Diet**

The patient will benefit from a diet that brings the opposite qualities into her body. A diet that pacifies the vata dosha is heavier, moist, warm, and generally more nourishing. Examples include cooked whole grains, oils such as ses-ame oil, nuts such as almonds and cashews, and warm milk. All foods should be served warm and taken with spices to ensure adequate digestion. The patient should be told to eat small amounts often and to avoid eating beyond the point where she is 75% full. Choosing the proper foods and taking them in the proper way will bring balance to the digestive system. The imbalance in the digestive system is understood to be the physical root of the condition.

**Lifestyle**

Mary will be instructed to go to bed earlier and get more rest. Proper rest is essential for balancing the vata dosha and giving the body time to heal. She will also be asked to take more time for lunch to allow her mind to settle down and to properly digest her food. During lunch she should leave the office and find a quiet place to eat. A quiet place to eat will reduce the vritti of her mind and support her digestion. Mary is also listening to music that disturbs the vata dosha, and will be instructed both to listen to calmer music and to spend more time with silence.

**Âsana**

Mary will slowly develop a daily asana practice that will balance the vata dosha. The assigned asana practice will emphasize slightly warming, stabilizing, heavy, soft, moist, dull, smooth, cloudy, dense, and gross qualities. Slow integration over time will prevent overwhelm, an emotion those with vata imbalance are prone to experience. She will also be instructed to apply specially prepared oils to her body, especially to her lower back, prior to asana practice. The oils will moisten and soften the tissues, support healing, and allow for greater flexibility, reducing the likelihood of injury. Mary will be instructed to move slowly, rest between poses, and practice with an emphasis on internal awareness. She will be asked to extend her inhalations during practice to create a warming effect and encourage the release of her muscle spasms.

**Breath**

Vata dosha will begin to settle down as Mary learns abdominal breathing. Mary will be instructed in how to breathe properly. She will then be asked to sit quietly twice each day with her eyes closed, focusing on relaxation and breath awareness. Once she is adequately practicing this, she will be taught alternate nostril breathing, a practice that pacifies vata dosha and helps prâna settle down.

**Sensory Stimulation**

Mary will be instructed in how to use her senses properly. This instruction will include color, sound, and aroma.
therapy. She will be asked to stop listening to loud rock music. Massage therapy, using the proper oils to help balance the *vata dosha*, will be prescribed. These therapies manage four of the five senses. Dietary therapy as described above completes the sensory protocol. As Mary begins to utilize her senses properly, the movement of *prâna* will be calmer, and *vata dosha* will be alleviated.

**Pratyâhâra**

External *pratyâhâra* techniques that deal with the proper use of the senses have already been described. Internal *pratyâhâra*, techniques that draw attention (*prâna*) inward, such as Yoga *nîdru*, calm the *prâna* in the entire body, and particularly in the injured area. This is one of the strongest therapies for pacifying *vata dosha*. Mary will be brought through a session of Yoga *nîdru* and given a CD to guide her through the process at home. This 45-minute practice will be performed 1–2 times per day.

**Meditation**

Mary will be instructed in meditation. There are many styles of meditation, and the form is less important than the results. The important component of meditation is achieving the silence that comes as the *vrittis* of the mind are diminished. As Mary’s meditation practice develops, she will experience greater quiet. This supports the stable quality of the mind and allows her to transcend the dramas of her life.

**Case Discussion**

There are many other therapies beyond the scope of this article that Ayurvedic practitioners could use to support the healing process for *vata*-type low back pain. Most notable in its absence is the use of herbs, which can be used to reduce pain, ease muscle spasm, improve circulation, balance digestion, and pacify the affected *dosha*. Additional therapies commonly used include cleansing (*niruha*) and nourishing (*anuvâsana*) enemas, as well as a special treatment called *katti basti*, in which herbal oils are contained over the area of injury on the lower back. Another therapy, *marma*, incorporates light finger pressure and the use of essential oils in treating specific points on the body called *marma* points.

There truly is no end to the possible modalities that can be applied to the patient. An understanding of the nature of the patient (*prakruti*) and the nature of the imbalance (*vikruti*) allows the practitioner to be very specific in the application of any modality, so long as the nature of the modality is known. Thus, complementary treatment such as chiropractic and acupuncture can also be administered in an Ayurvedic manner. What makes the application of a modality Ayurvedic is the proper understanding of the principles behind its application.

**Conclusion**

The Yoga teacher who is inspired to participate in the healing process of the patient has a very important role to play. At the time of this writing, most Ayurvedic practitioners are not adequately trained to administer Yoga therapies. Many of those who are would prefer to focus on diagnostics, as well as herbal and dietary therapies. The well-trained Yoga teacher, with advanced training in Ayurvedic Yoga therapy, is uniquely positioned to enter the healing paradigm. While diagnosis of the patient’s *prakruti* (constitution), *vikruti* (imbalance), and the development of the treatment plan are best left in the hands of the Ayurvedic practitioner, the Yoga teacher is the person who is best trained to administer *âsana*, *prânâyâma*, *pratyâhâra*, and meditation therapies. In this manner, the Ayurvedic practitioner and the Yoga teacher work hand-in-hand to improve the health of the patient.

The team approach to healthcare is common in many professions. In Western medicine, no one practitioner does all of the work. General practitioners, specialists, lab technicians, nurses, and aids all work together. In Ayurveda, the practitioner (*vaidya*) often works in conjunction with the massage therapist and Yoga therapist. When working together, the highest quality of care is delivered, and the patient has the greatest chance of healing.

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