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by Stacie Stukin

Yoga for Your Dosha

Does your yoga class not feel quite right? It could be because it's not a good match with your Ayurvedic dosha.

I am doing my umpteenth Chaturanga Dandasana at the Dancing Shiva Studio in Los Angeles and I am sweating—a lot. The room has beautiful, dark beechwood floors, the natural light is seductive, and soothing chants play in the background. However, I don't like any of it. The aggravation of saltwater running down my face is precisely why I never follow my friends, who enthusiastically tout spinning to nowhere on a stationary bike. This is also why I generally don't take vinyasa yoga classes. They leave me feeling agitated and surly. I used to think my aversion to heat-inducing exercise was a personal failure. But right now, the thermostat is turned up and as I continue to swelter this August afternoon, the clichéd lightbulb turns on in my head. I realize that not only am I susceptible to vata imbalances but that I'm also having a very *pitta* day. This means I am completely ruined because I'm in a *kapha*-stimulating yoga class.

If the words "vata, pitta, and kapha" mean absolutely nothing to you, then I completely understand where you are coming from. As I, too, was once ignorant that these Ayurvedic terms—which describe archetypal body characteristics as well as their tendency toward specific strengths, weaknesses, and imbalances—had direct links to my yoga practice.

Certainly, thanks to Deepak Chopra and my interest in complementary medicine, I was somewhat familiar with the basic tenets of Ayurvedic medicine, but I never knew it had deep ties to yoga. In fact, most Ayurvedic scholars agree that you really cannot practice one without the other.

"They have been sister sciences since the beginning in ancient India," explains David Frawley, Ayurvedic expert and an author of several books on the subject, who directs the New Mexico-based American Institute for Vedic Studies as well. "They comprise a whole system of human development where yoga is the more spiritually-oriented practice and Ayurveda deals with therapy and treatment for the physical body as well as the mind."

In his latest book, *Yoga for Your Body Type: An Ayurvedic Approach to Your Asana Practice* (Lotus Press, 2001), Frawley and his coauthor, Sandra Summerfield Kozak, take this point further: "The interface between self-healing and self-realization is the union between yoga and Ayurveda."

Understanding Doshas

Ayurveda means "the wisdom of life" in Sanskrit, and the science links the rhythms of the universal elements—earth, fire, air, water, and space—to individual

constitutions called doshas. The three dosha types are vata, pitta, and kapha, and while people all have some of each, generally, a person tends to have an abundance of one or a predominant combination of two.

Vata types are connected to the air and space, so they are similar to the wind—dry, cool, and capable of fast, unpredictable movement and thought. Pittas are aligned with fire, influenced by air, and act with intense determination. Finally, kaphas are a combination of earth and water, move slowly and gracefully, and tend to be both stable and loyal.

These doshic constitutions, known as prakruti, are determined at the moment of conception, according to Ayurveda. But doshas are like anything in life; they are fluid and affected by circumstance, emotion, or even the seasons. So on that August afternoon when Mas Vidal, the director of Dancing Shiva Studio, led his class through what he calls a "Veda Yoga" class, designed to reduce kapha, I was essentially doing the exact opposite of what I actually needed at that moment.

Let me explain: Since I am primarily a vata person with a dash of pitta, I'm best served by a slow, grounding practice that cools my heat and brings me out of the air and back to the earth. Then there's also a unique external circumstance that further aggravated my vata. The previous day, I had left New York City at 7 a.m. on a flight home to Los Angeles. Already being someone who tends to be a bit flighty, I had literally just been in the air travelling at mind-boggling speeds, and in addition, the heat of the day had aggravated my pitta, which fueled my tendency to push myself too hard. As Vidal encouraged the kapha folks to keep moving to produce the heat that would give them momentum to counterbalance their predisposition toward inertia, I was soaring in the ether like a whirling dervish propelled by a ball of fire.

No wonder I was upset. I felt like the Tasmanian Devil. During Savasana (Corpse Pose), I began cursing Vidal, who is actually charming, kind, and compassionate. But in the moment I could not see that. In fact, after the class, as I drove to meet friends for dinner, I began to experience the stomach cramping that occasionally plagues me. Guess what happens when your vata gets out of balance? There's a tendency toward gas and stomach pain. And when your pitta flares? It will spawn anger and irritability. When the kapha folks get out of whack, inertia rules and lethargy and lack of motivation keep them from moving forward.

It's precisely these connections among the doshas, physiology, and psychology, that inspire teachers like Mas Vidal to be mindful of how asana affects the individual and vice versa. The classes at Dancing Shiva are specifically designed to accommodate doshic tendencies.

"The key to Ayurveda is that it teaches us how to approach our practice in a specific way," Vidal says. "It's different for each individual, so they will reach their doshic balance in different ways." Vidal assists his students by continually educating them and helping them to incorporate other techniques into their yoga practice, such as utilizing aromatherapy for each dosha. At the end of his kapha class, as everyone is resting in final relaxation, he circulates through the room with

a spray bottle and sprinkles a mist of eucalyptus-scented water on his students because, he explains, "Eucalyptus energizes and opens the lungs. Kapha types often tend to suffer from asthma and extra mucus." For fiery pittas, a spritz of calming and cooling lavender does the trick, while vatas benefit from jasmine and rose.

The Yoga-Ayurveda Connection

Across the states in New York, Sarah Tomlinson and Gandharva Sauls are also exploring the link between Ayurveda and yoga. They founded the Ayurveda-Yoga Institute (www.ayurvedayogainstitute.com), and they base their teaching on the work of Sauls's mentor, Edward Tarabilda, who wrote the book *Ayurveda Revolutionized: Integrating Ancient and Modern Ayurveda* (Lotus Press, 1997).

Tarabilda, who passed away in 1999, developed an Ayurvedic system called the Astrology of the Eight Fields of Living, which classifies doshas and determines the planets that rule different areas in your life, such as career, health, spiritual path, creativity, and relationships, and discovers how a body type is out of balance. As in traditional astrology, Sauls creates a life blueprint using a person's date, time, and place of birth and presents his findings during a private consultation.

Then the yogic counseling begins with Tomlinson. A member of the first group of Jivamukti-trained teachers, Tomlinson slowly phased out her Ashtanga practice after a consultation with Sauls. She was 20 pounds heavier, and even in spite of her aggressive practice, she could not shed the extra weight. When Sauls told her that she had a tendency for vata imbalances, she cut back on the vigorous, athletic style yoga, began adhering to some of the dietary tenets of Ayurveda, and incorporated more forward bends and relaxing postures into her yoga practice. The pounds then came off without much effort.

Tomlinson applies what she has learned from her own personal experience to both her private and her public teaching. After looking through the papers and manuscripts that Tarabilda left behind, she found a series of 21 poses he recommended that are not only linked to the doshas but also linked to the planets and the gunas. The three gunas in Ayurveda are the same as the gunas of yoga. They are another level of archetypes that define basic human psychological states: sattva (balance), rajas (aggression), and also tamas (inertia). Of course, everyone strives for sattva, but in life, as in yoga practice, we need to incorporate the other two to be whole. So from here she creates a yogic prescription that incorporates pranayama, asana, and the occasional chanting. Ultimately, for Tomlinson, the key to achieving doshic balance is the approach you take to your practice.

Adapting the Poses

When Tomlinson and I begin discussing the way that I should be incorporating Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose) into my practice, she advises that I should do it several times but only hold it for a few breaths. "Keeping the movement compact and doing it in fluid repetition is relaxing for vata," she advises. "For the kapha person I recommend holding the pose for up to 20 breaths,

then it becomes much more energizing. If someone with more vata imbalance did that, he or she would become dizzy and disoriented."

I then reveal to her how much I happen to enjoy doing balancing poses. "That makes perfect sense," she says. "Balancing is very integrating, and this is especially true for vatas. These particular poses make them become aware of the top of their head all the way down to the bottom of their feet. It helps them become more grounded."

People with different doshic constitutions take class together all of the time, but according to Frawley, students with Ayurvedic knowledge can adapt a class to their personal needs through attitude and intention. "If everyone did their asana the exact same way, it would be like everyone taking the same medicine," he explains. "Vatas should practice slowly and deliberately. Kaphas need to challenge themselves more, and pittas need to relax and to avoid overheating," he also explains. "What you do in your yoga practice is basically just a preparation for the work that you do on your life force. According to Ayurvedic principle, the connection between our state of mind and our physical posture is the ultimate expression of our psychological energy."

Teaching Aid

This raises an intriguing challenge for yoga teachers. As more teachers become well versed in Ayurveda's ties to yoga, they are beginning to look at their students in a different way. Patricia Hansen has been teaching yoga for some 35 years and studying Ayurveda with Vasant Lad since 1983. Although she doesn't teach dosha-specific classes like Vidal, she does incorporate this knowledge into her teaching style. "It is just an extra awareness I have developed," Hansen comments. "I look at the way the students hold their bodies as well as the way they approach asana." And just as teachers might make seasonal adjustments by not teaching the same way in summer as they do in winter, classes take on doshic personalities and require different treatment.

"Sometimes I will walk into the room and find that everyone is very animated; they're climbing the walls," she explains. "That could be vata or pitta agitation. So right off the bat, I might try chanting and some mudra work."

Many yoga teachers will agree a well-rounded practice is tridoshic by nature and can accommodate any constitution or imbalance. "If you incorporate forward bends and backbends, twisting and standing poses, pranayama, chanting, as well as inversion, that's the key," says Hansen. "However the real high point of the class should be Savasana. That's where the real doshic integration takes place. Also, the essence of any practice is the attitude of the student."

With all this in mind, I've come back to Dancing Shiva—this time for a vata-balancing class. As I lie on my mat in a long, deep Savasana, I feel quite divine. But don't get me wrong: There are times when I crave a really sweaty, intense flow class. Those are generally days when my kapha flares. So the time, like my dosha, has to be right. But at this moment Vidal has just sprayed me with rose water, and

the worries of the day evaporate like the aromatic mist that surrounds me.

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