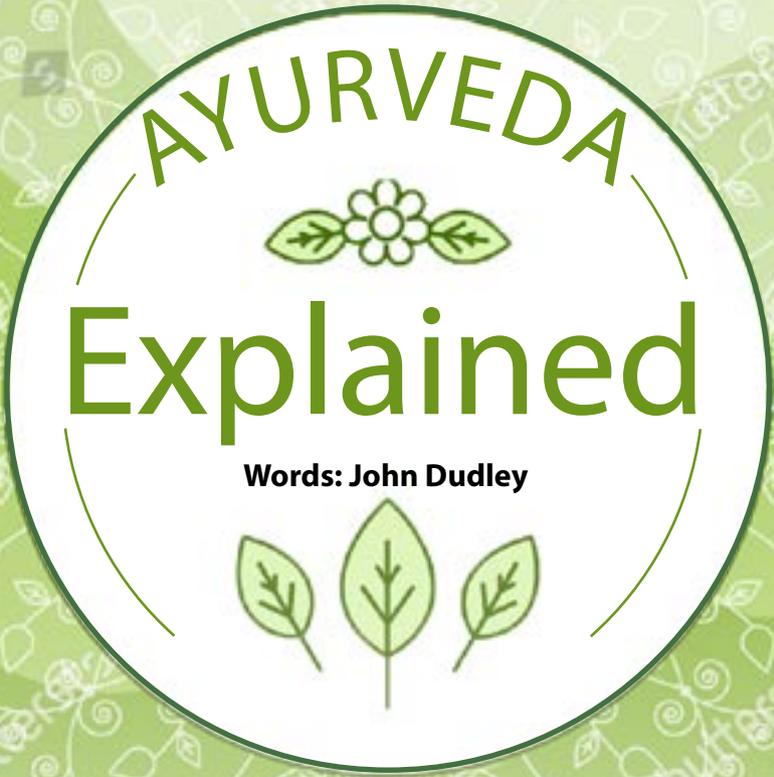


AYURVEDA



Explained

Words: John Dudley

Many of us began our yoga journey because we wanted to feel more flexible and gain a greater sense of wellbeing in the process. After a short period of practice, we started to experience the benefits and we knew that yoga really worked. This sense of wellbeing and indeed our overall health can be further enhanced by following the principles and guidance of another yoga-related ancient science – Ayurveda. Used together, Yoga and

Ayurveda can bring us outstanding health benefits.

Ayurveda is an ancient, holistic health-care system from the same Vedic tradition as yoga. It promotes wellness and helps prevent disease in both body and mind. The term Ayurveda consists of two Sanskrit words 'Ayur' and 'Veda'. 'Ayur' means life and 'Veda' means knowledge. So, Ayurveda is really that knowledge which enables us to live a perfectly healthy and happy life. Just like yoga, Ayurveda is not a belief system – we

don't have to believe in it for it to work. By following a few simple Ayurvedic tips for a couple of weeks, we can start to notice the benefits. People who follow Ayurvedic advice often report better sleep, improved digestion and elimination, increased energy levels and more resistance to common infections. Ayurveda can move us from feeling just 'rather average' to feeling full of positive energy, life force and enthusiasm. Ayurvedic health tips, all tailored to the individual, cover diet, lifestyle and seasonal advice.

Ayurveda is well regarded by the present Indian government as a useful, low-cost, alternative healthcare system. While Western medicine is good for physical injury, surgery and when we are seriously ill – Ayurveda can help prevent us from getting ill in the first place! It also offers solutions to many chronic health problems such as arthritis, that Western medicine has difficulty treating.

A lot of modern dietary and health advice tries to tell us what is good for 'us'. The key assumption here is that we are all the same and react in exactly the same way to food, herbs and medicines. Ayurveda takes a very different approach by recognising our differences and tailoring advice and therapies to our individual needs. It does this by categorising us into seven unique mind-body types, according to the Ayurvedic principles of the three *Doshas* known as *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha*. In very general terms, *Vata* governs bodily functions involving movement, *Pitta* is concerned with heat, metabolism and digestion and *Kapha* deals with structural aspects of our body and the fluids it contains.



Each of these principles is present to some extent in every living cell and organ of our body. However, we all have an inherent natural state (our '*Prakruti*') where some *Doshas* predominate over others in our mind-body. This is the constitution we were born with. The effects, the *Doshas* have on our physical and mental make-up can best be seen by looking at what happens when just a single *Dosha* is dominant.

For example, if *Vata Dosha* predominates we tend to be thin with a light build, have dry skin, be talkative and perform actions quickly. In addition, we learn very quickly - but also forget quickly. We

may be constipated, worry a lot and experience light sleep with a tendency towards insomnia.

If *Pitta* is the main *Dosha*, we have a strong digestion with sharp hunger. Our hair is often blond, light brown to reddish and we might have freckles. We are good speakers, have a strong intellect and may get angry quickly. We can also hold strong opinions and enjoy challenges.

If *Kapha* predominates then we probably have a heavy, solid build with good strength and physical endurance. We can also have dark hair with a smooth oily skin. We tend to be very relaxed, loving and forgiving. We may be slow learners, but have excellent



long term memory. Our sleep tends to be long and heavy too.

The above descriptions show our physical and mental characteristics, if just a single *Dosha* is dominant. In this case Ayurveda refers to people as 'pure *Pitta*', 'pure *Vata*', or 'pure *Kapha*' types. However, in most people, two *Doshas* predominate giving a mixture of these characteristics. On rare occasions, all three *Doshas* are present in equal amounts.

The concept of the *Doshas* is vital to the understanding of Ayurveda. All dietary, seasonal, lifestyle and medical advice is based on maintaining the natural balance of our *Doshas*. Most importantly, different *Dosha* types receive different advice! So, dairy products may be great for pure *Vata* types, but create real health problems for pure *Kapha* types!

When the *Doshas* are balanced, we experience perfect health. Anything that upsets this balance creates potential health issues. For example, environmental factors such as very

windy weather can disturb *Vata Dosha*. An excess of hot, spicy food can disturb *Pitta Dosha* and even a lack of exercise can increase *Kapha Dosha*! In Ayurveda, the imbalance present in our *Doshas* is referred to as our '*Vikruti*'.

If our natural balance is disturbed, Ayurveda provides a range of strategies to restore the balance. This could be something as simple as a self-administered oil massage to pacify *Vata*, avoiding spicy food or taking cooling herbs to reduce *Pitta* or even getting more exercise to reduce *Kapha*.

How can we determine our natural constitution? Well, there are a number of good, online quizzes which can give us an initial indication of our predominant *Doshas*. However, these questionnaires often give results which confuse our current state of imbalance with our natural state. Ideally both of these states are best determined by a skilled Ayurvedic practitioner through a process called 'pulse diagnosis' (*Nadi Vigyan* or *Nadi Pariksha*). Subtle



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patterns in our pulse give information on our *Prakruti*, *Vikruti* and overall state of health. So Ayurveda simply does not need the costly and high tech equipment used by western medicine in order to diagnose imbalance and disease. This gives it a major economic advantage, particularly for developing countries.

In addition to individualised treatment, Ayurveda also places great emphasis on prevention. It realises that not only is prevention much simpler than cure, it is also much cheaper! By detecting imbalances at an early stage (for example, when we are feeling slightly 'off colour') and then rebalancing the *Doshas*, Ayurveda aims to prevent illness and remove the root cause of disease.

Ayurveda also places great importance on proper digestion and elimination. It views poor digestion as being responsible for the production of toxins (*Ama*). These ultimately lead to disease. Not only do we have to properly digest food, we also have to 'digest' all sensory inputs. So, if we have experienced emotional trauma, or even watched too many frightening movies, we also have to 'digest' these experiences. In Ayurveda, the concept of *Agni* or 'internal fire' is responsible for digestion. So anything which increases *Agni* improves our digestion and our ability to burn off toxins. Ayurveda recommends a range of digestive stimulants such as ginger and black pepper to increase *Agni*. Sipping warm water throughout the day also increases our digestive fire. However, taking ice cold drinks with a meal is viewed as harmful as this puts out the 'digestive fire'.

Although Ayurveda offers detox procedures, it suggests it is far better not to allow toxins to develop in the first place. Having a properly functioning *Agni* goes a long way to achieving this, so Ayurveda offers practical tips for food preparation and mealtimes.

If we already have a health problem, we can get a diagnosis from a qualified Ayurvedic practitioner

who will ask us a number of questions relating to our health and carry out a 'pulse diagnosis' procedure. This determines the degree of imbalance of the *Doshas* in our system and the level of toxins present. Ideally, practitioners will be trained to degree level (e.g. Bachelors of Ayurvedic Medicine and Surgery – 'BAMS') together with relevant clinical experience. Ayurveda's unique strength is that different individuals will receive very different healthcare advice, and even completely different treatments, for the same set of 'symptoms'!

Treatment can often be as simple as recommending dietary and lifestyle changes. It might also involve the use of herbal remedies. If toxins are present then the usual process is to first detoxify our system, then rebalance the *Doshas*. Simple detox can be done at home and might just involve taking an herbal preparation called '*Triphala*' (containing three key Ayurvedic herbs). Deeper detox procedures are best performed under supervision in a clinic. These processes are known as '*Panchakarma*' – the five cleansing actions. They are designed to free up toxins and then eliminate them from our system.



There is no doubt that the practice of yoga clearly increases our physical flexibility. Many find it also increases their mental flexibility and willingness to try new things. If we want to improve our existing health, we could try following Ayurvedic principles, tailored to our specific mind-body type for a few weeks and see how we feel. We may be pleasantly surprised at how quickly we begin to notice the benefits.

John Dudley is the editor of vedicplanet.com website which explains the yoga-related Vedic Sciences of *Jyotish*, *Ayurveda* and *Vastu*. He has practised yoga and meditation for over 40 years and has lived at an Ashram in India.

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