



Ayurveda and Yoga Therapy

Knowledge of Ayurveda can add subtlety to your yoga teaching and yoga therapy practice. Learn the basic characteristics of the Ayurvedic constitutions and tips for bringing balance to each.

by Timothy McCall, MD

According to Ayurveda, India's traditional medical system, each one of us has an inborn constitution, or prakriti, that shapes our bodies, minds, and predilections. Most yoga teachers know at least a little about Ayurveda and have some notion of the basic constitutional types (doshas) of kapha, pitta, and vata. According to the Ayurvedic Practitioner Swami Shivananda, the Sanskrit word "dosha" literally means "that which becomes imbalanced." This reflects the Ayurvedic belief that people of different constitutions, left to their own devices, often make lifestyle decisions—and choose yoga practices—that tend to put them further out of balance. Ayurveda also holds that people of different constitutions are prone to diseases that reflect the ways the doshas become imbalanced.

The Stable Kapha

In Ayurvedic thinking, kapha is associated with the earth and water elements. Think heavy and stable. Kaphas tend to be strong, with tremendous endurance, but they also tend toward laziness. Kaphas are more likely than people of other constitutions to be sedentary. Kaphas are prone to depression, mucus-forming conditions such as bronchitis and sinus infections, and Type 2 diabetes (the kind associated with being overweight). If they take care of themselves, though, Ayurveda says they are also likely to live longer than people of other constitutions.

If kaphas do yoga, they are likely to choose gentle styles or restorative classes, things that feel good but don't challenge them too much. Anyone can benefit from relaxing yoga, of course, but to get the full benefits of the practice, kaphas usually need to be encouraged to work harder and do more. Inertia—that is, the tendency to stay still if you're not moving, and to stay in motion if you're already moving—is the operative principle of this dosha. Sandra Summerfield Kozak, coauthor with David Frawley of *Yoga for Your Type: An Ayurvedic Approach to Your Asana Practice*, has found that 15 minutes of vigorous activity at the beginning of practice sessions is often enough to get students out of the so-called "kaphic slump." After that, they may be energized and ready to give it their all. Similarly,



if you can motivate kaphic students to do a challenging practice regularly, they may be able to stick with it, and that can make a huge difference in their mood and overall health.

The Passion of the Pitta

Pittas are typically passionate and highly intelligent, but they are also prone to anger and aggressiveness. Think of Type A personalities. People of this constitution—in which, according to Ayurvedic teaching, the fire element dominates—are more likely to develop inflammatory conditions such as lupus, skin eruptions, and heart disease. Many heart attacks, for example, happen in the aftermath of an angry outburst or other high emotions.

If pittas do yoga, they are often drawn to challenging practices, such as vigorous vinyasa classes, or to conceptually-oriented styles, such as Iyengar yoga, and they can get competitive about their yoga. Even though relaxation is what they need more than anything, they often resist it because they think it's not a good use of their time (in fact, time urgency is one of the hallmarks of the type A personality). One of the challenges of working with people of this constitution is to get them to back off, try less hard in the poses, be less achievement-oriented when they do yoga, and build relaxation into their routines. They often benefit from just the styles of yoga and practices that many kaphas gravitate toward.

Vata in Motion

Vatas tend to be creative and high-energy, in constant motion, but easily distracted. According to Ayurvedic teaching, in vata dosha the air and space elements dominate. Vatas are more likely to develop conditions such as anxiety, arthritis, and diseases of nervous system. Constipation and insomnia are common complaints.

Vatas tend to choose active, movement-oriented classes. They are less likely to be happy in classes in which the flow is broken up for too long to discuss philosophy or explain the subtleties of anatomical alignment. Due to their restless minds, some vatas may have a hard time with slower, more meditative practices. At the beginning of a practice session, vatas may benefit from flowing poses, such as multiple sun salutations, to burn off some steam. Afterward, grounding practices, such as standing poses held for a minute or longer (depending on the student's level), can help reduce vata. Some vatas are drawn to vigorous pranayama practices such as bhastrika, kapalabhati, and fancy ratio breathing with long



breath retentions. Unless they've gotten themselves well-grounded first, however, these practices can put them even more out of balance.

Going Deeper

In reality, the Ayurvedic understanding of constitutions is much subtler than what I've described above. Each person has elements of all three doshas, so reducing a student to a single type will always be an oversimplification. Furthermore, prakritis like vata-pitta, in which two doshas are balanced fairly evenly, are common; and a few people are tridoshic, meaning they've got a more or less even balance of all three. People may also manifest temporary imbalances (vikruti) that do not reflect their underlying prakriti. For example, people of any constitution who undergo the movement, disruption, and stimulation of travel may find their vata getting out of whack. That, according to Ayurveda, is why insomnia and constipation are so common when you're on the road, and why travelers may benefit from vata-pacifying routines.

Ayurveda is a very deep well, and I believe that yoga teachers and therapists should make this field part of their ongoing study. In addition to the perspective it provides on yoga and yoga therapy, Ayurveda as a form of complementary medicine relies upon a broad array of tools including herbs, a variety of massage and bodywork practices, the multiday detoxification ritual known as panchakarma, and even surgery, although Ayurvedic practitioners tend to start with simple dietary and lifestyle interventions. Learning more about Ayurveda can help you better practice yoga therapy, and you may discover in the process that you also learn more about yourself.



Timothy McCall, MD teaches yoga therapy seminars worldwide. He is a board-certified internist, the medical editor of *Yoga Journal* and the best selling author of [Yoga as Medicine](#). This article originally appeared in *Yoga Journal*. You can download a PDF of this article and other articles and view his teaching schedule at [DrMcCall.com](#).