Yoga and Ayurveda to Support Recovery from Drug and Alcohol Addiction

by Catherine O’Neill

The ancient wisdom of Ayurveda (science of self-healing) and Yoga (science of self-realization) offer therapies and practices to bring about and maintain lasting sobriety from drug and alcohol addiction.

Ayurveda views each individual as a unique expression of the five elements, refined into three essential doshas (biological humors): Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. This holistic healing system offers simple and practical methods to repair and rejuvenate the body through the use of five-sense therapies and specific detoxification techniques. Ayurvedic therapies revitalize the body’s systems and boost the immune system, giving a strong foundation in health and an increased ability to face the challenges and stresses of daily life without resorting to old addictive behaviors. Most importantly, treatment methods employed by Ayurveda rely on lifestyle changes rather than on simply taking a pill to eradicate symptoms.

Together, Yoga and Ayurveda offer a truly empowering personal program of recovery. Accordingly, I have set out, below, the 12 steps to healing addiction with Yoga and Ayurveda:

1. Diet
2. Herbal Remedies
3. Massage therapy (Ayurvedic body treatments)
4. Aromatherapy
5. Sound Therapy (Mantra and Kirtan)
6. Color therapy
7. Detoxification
8. Asana
9. Pranayama (breathing exercises)
10. Relaxation
11. Positive thinking and meditation
12. Synthesis of the Four Paths of Yoga – Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Jnana Yoga

Diet
The diet for those coming off alcohol and drugs should be warm and nourishing; it should include cooked whole grains (grains are high in the B vitamins), fresh vegetables, and fruits. It is best to favor cooked foods over raw, cold foods. Often we see strong attachments to stimulant substances like coffee and sugar, and in the initial stages of withdrawal, these stimulants can actually be helpful. Ayurveda does not recommend any drastic changes to the body, as we know doing too much, too soon will create imbalance. However, when sobriety is achieved, it is important to look at reducing the intake of these stimulating substances, replacing them gradually with healthy alternatives.

Most addictions lead to a Vata imbalance (excess mobility and dryness), so tonic foods like milk, almonds, pine nuts, and sesame seeds are very useful. An excellent rejuvenator for the system is ghee (clarified butter); recovering addicts and alcoholics need the nourishment ghee gives in order to feed the
damaged nervous system, lubricate the entire system, and restore the strength of the immune system. Ghee can be used as a base cooking oil or simply added to each warm meal.

**Herbal Therapy**

It is important to ensure the digestive capacity is strong enough for the body to rebuild itself with the food. One of the first things to do in this respect is to eliminate all cold/iced drinks. Drinking hot herbal teas will help to soothe, balance, and detoxify the system. Ayurveda employs spices – used in cooking and/or taken as a digestive formula – to aid digestion. Household spices like fresh ginger, fennel, cumin, coriander, nutmeg, cardamom, cinnamon, and pepper help the health and function of the digestive process. Certain traditional Ayurvedic formulas can be taken to help each doshic type with digestion: *Hingvastra* is used to help Vata’s variable digestion (asadetida/hing is part of this formula, which helps relieve gas). For Pitta types, we can use the formula *Avipattikar*, and for Kapha types, stronger, more pungent herbs, like those combined in *Trikut*, are used.

Herbal therapy is offered depending on the constitutional type, the imbalanced dosha(s), keeping in mind the addictive substance and its propensity to damage particular tissues and organs. In general, nervines would be used to calm the mind (gotu kola, brahmi, jatamansi, valerian, chamomile, etc.). Gotu kola (taken in ghee) is the best herb to help cleanse hallucinogenic drugs from the liver and brain; Ashwagandha is the best herb for helping to rebuild the nervous system; and Shatavari is given to help restore emotional sensitivity and balance.

The diuretic effect of most drugs dry out the system, especially the large intestine, the main site of Vata in the body. Kidney function will also be compromised; the kidneys are another organ governed by the Vata dosha. The best Ayurvedic herb for tonifying and strengthening the kidneys is shilajit. Excessive use of alcohol will lead to problems in the liver, a major organ governed by the Pitta dosha. Turmeric and Bhumyamalaki are two herbs that are very good for clearing liver energy. Aloe Vera juice is a good mild liver tonic and can be very effective in cooling people who have imbibed too much alcohol, which represents the fire quality.

**Massage Therapy**

(Ayurvedic Body Treatments)

*Abhyanga*, a massage with warm, herb-infused oil, can be self-administered daily and is wonderfully relaxing yet, at the same time, energizing. It is easy to do and takes only about 15-30 minutes. It helps pacify Vata dosha, relieving stress, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed and spaced-out. The Ayurvedic texts recommend that the massage be done in the morning, since it helps keep energy levels high during the day and helps promote easy, restful sleep at night. The massage also helps promote balanced emotions and contain prana within the body. With regular performance of the massage, deep-seated toxins in the joints and tissues are loosened and released into the system for elimination through the natural toxin-release processes.

**Aromatherapy**

Essential oils offer many beneficial properties from sedation to stimulation. Ayurveda treats imbalances in each dosha with its opposite qualities. Since Vata is composed from the air element, it is light, dry, mobile, and cold. Vata is balanced by sweet, warming aromas like lavender, cinnamon, orange, chamomile. Pitta is the fire dosha.

Having the qualities of heat, it is balanced by sweet, cooling scents like rose, jasmine, and sandalwood. Kapha is water and earth and is predominantly cold, moist, slow, and heavy in nature. It can be treated with warming, drying, lightening, and stimulating oils like basil, camphor, cloves, eucalyptus, sage, and thyme.

The essential oils can be added to a bath or used as a compress (especially good for headaches and nervous tension). It is also very useful to have the scent diffused into a room. At night, this can aid sleep, and at the workplace, this can help overcome feelings of stress or irritation.

**Sound Therapy**

Sound healing often begins with moving people away from excessively stimulating (rap, heavy rock) music or depressing music (blues, sentimental love songs, and ballads) toward more uplifting and balancing music – perhaps classical or instrumental to avoid the repeated listening to lyrics that may trigger unhappy or sad emotions from the past. The highest sound therapy is mantra. More and more people in the West are now experiencing the healing effect of mantra through Kirtan, the call-and-response chanting, which ends in silence, the ultimate healer.

**Color Therapy**

Another welcome therapy is that of color. Using plants (green color for healing energy) is a simple starting point. Fresh flowers offer both fragrance and color and influence the heart. People in recovery find it...
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> good therapy to purchase a bouquet of flowers every week to reward themselves for their continued abstinence. People recovering from alcohol and drug addiction also benefit by employing color therapy in their choice of clothing. As a rule, it is best to avoid black, brown, and gray as these have a more depressing effect. Light, pleasant colors in both the home and workplace do a lot to improve mood.

Detoxification

If detoxification is required, Ayurveda offers a three-part process known as Pancha Karma. It is important to understand that this is a process, which involves preparation, cleansing, and rejuvenation. Pancha Karma takes time and should be done with a qualified professional. Often, a person early in recovery will require some tonification before any elimination therapies may be employed. Ongoing mild tonification and detoxification can be achieved by taking Triphala regularly. Triphala is a classic Ayurvedic formula containing three fruits amalaki, haritaki, and bibhitaki. It balances the three doshas and is safe for use in the long term. It is high in vitamin C and has strong antioxidant effects. The cleansing food of Ayurveda is kitcharee, a dish consisting of basmati rice, split mung beans, ghee, and spices. It is nourishing, yet easy to digest and easy to cook; it also cleanses the digestive system. Eating kitcharee, taking Triphala, and doing daily self-abhyanga for three to ten days can achieve a simple home detoxification.

Asana

Yogic physical exercises (asanas) are designed to develop the body, broaden the mental faculties, and broaden the spiritual capacities. Yoga exercises improve the health of the spine and aid the proper function of the internal organs. They also work on the nervous system and the endocrine system (glands and hormones), thereby restoring health and balance to the entire system.

Many detoxification/rehabilitation centers are now offering yoga classes because of the many benefits their patients feel from the practice. It is important to note that asana practice denotes moderate, conscious, gentle exercises, promoting calmness and helping to move and balance the prana (vital life force), thus breaking the stagnation and imbalances caused by drug and alcohol abuse. Asana practice also helps concentration and leads to increased focus and awareness.

Pranayama (Proper Breathing)

Breathing techniques, like deep abdominal breathing, help to balance and calm the mind, increasing mental clarity and alertness, and can be practiced at any time. Most people take shallow breaths into the chest alone; deep breathing can nourish and calm the central nervous system. Such breathing is an essential tool in overcoming any addiction.

Relaxation

Yogic relaxation practices are useful in reducing mental tension and anxiety. Due to the over-stimulation of the body through drugs and alcohol, often there are problems with nervous energy and insomnia. Simple techniques like Savasana (corpses pose) with auto-suggestion relaxation (tensing, then relaxing, each part of the body progressively from toes to head while mentally repeating “I am relaxing my toes, feet, legs, back, etc.”) can be taught and practiced for ten to 15 minutes daily to calm and stabilize the body and mind. The ability to consciously relax the body and mind is a great practical way to increase self-esteem and self-confidence.

Positive Thinking and Meditation

“All addictions are part of a psychological pattern of dependency. This must be addressed through efforts to contact the true Self that is independent and transcends environmental influences.” To overcome any disorder of the mind, it is important to understand how the mind works. For those who have problems with addiction, basically the mind is out of control. Addiction is the nature of the mind: the mind attaches to a thought and then has the tendency to repeat that thought over and over again; its mechanics are habitual. Addiction is simply a negative habit/association. The mind associates that alcohol/drugs are a solution and habitually jumps to this wrong conclusion; the mind gets into a loop, and it is difficult to get out of that loop. Positive thinking and meditation offer techniques to slow the mind down so its habit can be changed. The initial aim is to increase the lapsed time between the craving, habitual thought, and the action. These mental techniques help to straighten out the mind, bringing simplicity and clarity by replacing negative thinking and emotions with opposing positive thoughts and attitudes.

In the beginning, it is difficult to make the mind positive as it has become dull and lethargic through its destructive habit. Satsang – spending time in the company of wise, spiritual, positive people – is a good way to uplift the mind. The fellowship found in 12-step meetings is an example of a readily available satsang. Here, newly sober people have the benefit of hearing the stories of those who have fought the battle of addiction and are now in continuous abstinence. Their stories tell what it was like (identification), what happened (moment of clarity), and what it is like now (ongoing experience of life on life’s terms). Even reading the testimonies of people who have found balance can help if you are unable to attend group support meetings every day, and these accounts are found in most 12-step literature. Satsang inspires us to do the right thing. Addiction is self-destructive, so often we benefit by being in the company of those who are able to love us until we can love ourselves – i.e., we get help from outside until it can come from within. When addicts/ alcoholics feel the love and understanding from others, they are more able to care about themselves.

The mind of the alcoholic/drug abuser is addictive, obsessive, compulsive, and dysfunctional. They need to relearn things with people who are already healthy. They need
to be under the influence of those who are strong and who know where happiness lies. They need to have the courage to face their problem, and this is easier when they are with those who have courage, truth, love, and compassion. Unconditional support is required. Recovering addicts/alcoholics need to be around people who will encourage them on their new path.

Synthesis of the Four Paths of Yoga: Karma, Bhakti, Raja, Jnana

Addiction is understood to be a malady of body, mind, and spirit. Yoga views the individual as a holistic personality of three bodies (physical, astral, causal). The synthesis of the Four Paths of Yoga offer an integral approach combining

1. the physical and breathing exercises of Hatha yoga methods with
2. the meditation and mind analysis of Raja Yoga methods;
3. the selfless service of Karma yoga (action without personal egoistic motive or a sense of being the doer); and
4. the philosophical inquiry about the nature of “who am I?” and my relationship to the universe (Jnana yoga).

The practice of these Four Paths of Yoga needs to be done on a daily basis, a little at a time. This practice is the necessary strategy to bring back wholeness and health and to combat addiction, which is a symptom of not being whole. The variety of practices helps a person to have choices in daily life while maintaining healthy boundaries and promoting progress in achieving self-control, a positive attitude, and a healthy lifestyle.

To establish oneself on the path of self-healing and wholeness, it is necessary to get out of the ego and understand the basic truth: the unity of life. Karma Yoga (selfless service, living to serve others or a power greater than oneself and one's ego) is very important for healing. Bhakti Yoga is the practice of self-surrender through devotion and worship. An activity that is becoming more common in the West today is Kirtan (call-and-response chanting of mantra), a sure method of healing as it brings positive emotions of joy and love and connection to the divine.

Raja Yoga is represented by the Eightfold Path offering purification through practice of the yamas, niyamas, asanas, etc. These are guidelines in positive self-discipline and control of mind – the opposite of the root of all addictive habits. This purification leads us to meditation, a sure method of consciously connecting with our Higher Power/Self.

Jnana Yoga is affirming our true self; once we realize our true nature, all psychological problems are removed at the roots. Affirmation of the self and identification with the self removes all cravings, sense of lack, self-esteem problems, and self-defeating behaviors.

Combining Yoga psychology and the Yogic philosophy of the self alongside an Ayurvedic lifestyle offers a sure path from self-destruction to self-realization – one day at a time. This powerful combination can be experienced in-depth at The Yoga of Recovery retreat, offered in the Bahamas, India, Canada, New York, and California in 2007. For more information, please visit www.yogaofrecovery.com.

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