

The Ayurvedic Approach to Using Asana According to Doshic Imbalances

Looking at Asana through an Ayurvedic lens gives you a massive platform to cater to the individual needs of your students. Linking Ayurveda with Asana by default works much more effectively if classes are private, as we are well too familiar with the fact that “one size fits all” has never applied to Yoga, and we all need catered “recipes” to help our bodies and minds come back to (or maintain) that state of perfect equilibrium.

In Ayurveda, there are 3 body types, known as “Doshas”, which each correspond to two elements combined. Vata Dosha is made up of Air and Space, Pitta Dosha made up of Fire and Water, and Kapha Dosha made up of Water and Earth. We will look at the 3 types of doshic imbalance, and examine how Asana should be approached accordingly.

It is important to keep in mind that for every dosha you are trying to pacify, taking a genuine 180° turn in the opposite direction may be a little hard-hitting for some. Be sensitive in your approach, always remembering the inherent nature of each individual.

Let’s start off with Vata dosha, or simply put, the airy and “spacey” element that constitutes our bodies and minds, all that is light, quick, mobile, spacious, clear and dry. The “Vata mind” (or the “monkey mind” as referred to by many) is an all too common issue in today’s society, and predominantly in the west. With the non-stop busy lifestyles that most of us lead, which are paradoxically seen as a sign of achievement and success, a grave imbalance begins to materialize, by which the body and mind can never be calm. After some time, in many cases, we completely lose touch with this peaceful state of mind, that is, in fact, the purest and most valuable to us.

Using asana to balance the monkey mind, we need to employ postures that are grounding, postures that we can stay in for a while, reducing quick movements and changeability in the practice to a maximum. If you are used to sharing, for example, between 8 to 12 Asanas in your class, you’re probably going to want to halve that. Spend a fair amount of time in each of your chosen postures, using this time to your advantage by guiding your students to deepen each one. Always keep in mind the element you are trying to appease. In this case, space and air will be balanced out with heavier elements that ground and root, like those of earth and water. Your intention will bring about the class you want your students to feel, so setting an intention around the idea of establishing a connection to the earth (which is heavy, calm, soft and soothing) may help as a starting point. You may want them to spread their toes out before entering into a pose, a very simple yet effective method to help them bring awareness to their connection with the ground beneath them, to bring about a sense of strength, steadiness and stability. You may want to reduce postures

that are seen as “heady”. For instance, if you enjoy using inverted postures in your classes, by all means incorporate them into the practice but think about spending less time on them than some of the sitting or standing ones. Any postures that allow the body to be effortlessly still (bar the mind which may struggle in keeping the body still!), as well as any of the relaxation postures, are brilliant tools to use.

Do not be scared off by lengthening your final Savasana! Without a doubt, the students who need it most are those that you will see tossing and turning, opening their eyes are looking for something out there in the sky! Stand your ground and keep them in that safe, quiet space for as long as you can. A guided Savasana will help, as it will give them something to keep their mind focused on without letting the monkey mind take control. As a general rule, students that display the qualities of air and space will react well to the soothing sound of your voice guiding them gently through the practice. A guided “moving meditation” will suit them well. Left alone for too long in silence, however, the mind will step in and fill in the void ;-)! So incorporating soft, gentle music into the practice can always be a good idea too! As for Pranayama, if we establish that air and space are cooling elements, inevitably we’ll want to balance that with a tool that keeps the body warm, without creating too much internal movement. As one example of many, a gentle, soft, and constant Ujjayi breath to keep throughout the practice could help in a number of ways, as it will balance those cooling properties, give students something to focus on, and if the students are encouraged to prolong their breath instead of speeding up its pace, calmness will instill itself in the mind.

Using breathing techniques where exhales can be lengthened will also activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which in turn will quiet the mind.

Now let’s look at a Doshic imbalance that has a little more fire to it! Pitta dosha constitutes of the elements of fire and water. Those that display the qualities of fire and water are often quite bright, courageous, passionate, driven, competitive and tend to be perfectionists. When aggravated, criticism (either towards oneself or towards others), irritability, frustration and sudden spurts of anger may result. These characteristics can also be thought of as hot, sharp, light and mobile. Without knowing much else about your students, you could probably deduct, if they are comparatively aggravated in the elements of fire and water, that they will approach the practice from a firm angle; they may want to push their body past that place of comfort to feel they are going the full mile, they may look at others to see what a certain posture *should* look like, aiming for the perfect posture whilst ignoring the needs, limitations and individual structure of their own body. They may also feel like a rigorous and sweat-inducing practice is what they need, simply because it will be further reinforcing their predominant elements, but not necessarily balancing them out, which is what the Ayurvedic approach is all about! Instead of giving them a practice that you feel will please them you need to give them a practice that will

genuinely help them. How does one balance those fire and water elements, those hot, mobile, sharp qualities as well as those perfectionistic tendencies?

Probably not through a fast-paced Ashtanga practice or intense Bikram practice, which in most cases, ironically, is where you will find that 90% of students present are Pitta dominant!

First of all, we want to think about calming their mind from that critical perspective. A good start-off point is getting them to close their eyes; that way, no way of being able to compare to anyone else! The simple fact of closing the eyes automatically makes one go within, establishing that unique connection with one's body. You probably don't want to be demonstrating advanced postures too much, as you may find they will want to try them too to their full extent, push past their threshold, and in the worst case scenario may injure themselves as a result.

The seat of Pitta lies predominantly in the upper abdomen, and strong emphasis is placed on the stomach and liver. Harmonising the digestive organs will have a profound effect on balancing Pitta, so think about using asanas that place gentle pressure on the internal digestive organs, such as gentle backbends on the tummy, forward bends, spinal twists or others such as Halasana, which will always be of benefit, as long as students don't force the asana and keep mindful about each posture, focusing on the present moment and letting go of expectations and goals. A cooling practice will help to pacify the heat quality of Pitta, so think about anything that cools and calms: left-nostril breathing, a cooling Sheetalī or Sītkārī pranayama, or the sweet sounds of birdsongs as a background to soothe the mind... Anything that will allow them to enjoy the practice, let go of rigidity, have a little fun and not take themselves too seriously will undoubtedly be of great benefit!

Lastly, let's take a look at a person that may have an aggravation in the elements of water and earth, or Kapha dosha. Kapha people tend to be naturally calm, caring, loyal, patient, inherently content with where they are, and will have no problem sitting quietly somewhere contemplating the beauty of life. They enjoy routine, stability and security. When the elements are heightened, however, some of the qualities that may shine through are lethargy, laziness, heaviness, drowsiness, melancholy or even depression. Any watery and earthy adjectives are pretty much in there!

So how do we tweak our yoga practice in order for it to become Kapha pacifying? Anything really that involves a lot of movement to get that blocked, static energy circulating again and balance the heavy with the light! Think of shortening Savasanas and prolonging Sun Salutations. Getting your students to a bearable sweat to begin the practice will invigorate them and have them ready for more action! This is a great time to place emphasis on those "heady" postures that you were trying to reduce when treating aggravated Vata. Get their blood to flow against the force of

gravity by bringing their legs up or their heart above their head, which will energize the cells and oxygenate the brain.

Whereas we're trying to pacify those fiery qualities in the Pitta aggravated students by getting them to calm down on the intensity of the postures, and work at about 80% of their capacity, we want to do the opposite with the students whose earth and water elements are aggravated, by pushing them to their full capacity. We want them to bring 100% of their ability to the practice, if not pushing themselves just a little further past what they may believe is their full potential. Get them to stay just that little bit longer in the posture when you feel is the time to take them out; for instance, counting two more breaths, and only then move onto the next. Prioritize standing postures over sitting postures, in order to activate all parts of the body, like spending more time in Pada Hastasana over Pachimotanasana. Most importantly, even though you may be pushing them somewhat, ultimately you want them to enjoy the practice! So think about keeping a fun and joyful element to your class to harmonise the intensity of the practice.

When tackling asana through an Ayurvedic approach, just remember that whatever the Dosha you are trying to balance, the law of opposites will usually work the trick! Most importantly, remember to set an intention from the heart for the class you are going to share. Whatever the level, physical, mental and emotional state of your students, be there to create a safe, loving and accepting environment for them, and everything will flow just as it should!