



# Light on AYURVEDA

JOURNAL OF HEALTH



Especially written for 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Special Issue

## Ayurveda, Addiction and Recovery

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Ayurveda is often introduced and practiced alongside its sister science of yoga, which has been heartily embraced by a large number of Westerners, and is now being utilized not only as a form of exercise, but as a therapeutic remedy as well. Therapeutic use of yoga has particularly grown within the addiction recovery community, where *haṭha-yoga* is often used to help patients through their time in early recovery. Outside of rehab centers, there are an increasing number of yoga teachers offering “Yoga of Recovery (YoR)” classes in our communities. These classes emphasize the connections between yoga and “12-Step” programs, which began in the 1930s with the first program of Alcoholics Anonymous, and reportedly number over 165 today. Addiction is a major issue in our modern society, and is aptly described as a significant social plague. In addition, a considerable number of people make several attempts at sobriety before it truly takes hold. Recovery is therefore seen by many as a life-long process that necessitates a holistic solution: incorporating wisdom and practices that address physical, mental, emotional and spiritual well-being. By including Ayurveda along with the philosophy and psychology of yoga, YoR creates a fully integrated, holistic healing approach to this rampant disorder of our modern world.

YoR programs include immersion retreats, teacher training, and counselor programs that provide a wide range of tools for working with people in their struggle through the addictive process of any substance or behavior. Six tenets form the basis of YoR. These tenets address the spiritual malady that is addiction, and provide a means for practitioners and people looking to overcome their own self-destructive and addictive tendencies to understand

how to approach recovery from many angles simultaneously.

It therefore offers a multi-faceted solution to a multi-pronged problem. YoR is not a protocol for treatment, however, but rather an invitation to each individual to undertake personal investigation and self-inquiry around their various addictive processes. It guides individuals in utilizing the many healing aspects of the Vedic sciences in the recovery process.



The six tenets of YoR are:

1. Life is Longing;
2. Life is *Prāṇa*;
3. Life is Relationship;
4. Life is Sweet;
5. Life is Love; and
6. Life is Progress.

In this article we'll introduce these six tenets of YoR and share examples of an ongoing dialogue with YoR practitioners about how they apply these in their life.

**Life is Longing** is the first tenet of YoR. This deals with the spiritual aspect of the disease of addiction. Here we pose the question: “Is our ‘acting out’ behavior in part due to the fact that we are trying to materialize/actualize something that is a spiritual need within us?” We examine the roots, the storyline of our addictive behaviors through the question, “What do I long for?” We must honor our longing by

dedicating time and space to spiritual practices. If we attempt to fulfill these purely by physical methods it will corrupt into the craving process.

One YoR student described her experience of this tenet by using a metaphor to her food addiction:

Intimacy in all different types of relationships (love relationships, parental, friendship, etc.). . . . In our program this weekend, you said something that really hit home with me. You said that eating was 'the most' intimate experience you can have. You eat an apple and it becomes a part of you. Those few words, along with the question 'What do you long for?' immediately brought clarity to me. It makes perfect sense to me now why I overeat and the 'hunger I am really trying to satisfy'. The retreat was so nourishing and healing for me. I cannot express how deeply the experience has touched me.

**Life is Prāṇa** is the second tenet. The dependency upon prāṇa (life force energy) is truly built into our human condition and profoundly affects the addictive process. We ingest prāṇa, at the gross level, through food, heat, liquids and air (breath), and, on a subtle level, through sensory impressions (predominantly the senses related to air and ether: sound and touch). Looking at the primary sources of our prāṇa (air, water, and food), we can happily note that there are, as yet, no rehabilitation facilities for people suffering from their "addiction" to fresh air and water! It should be noted that there are indeed rehabilitation centers for those who suffer from their addiction to food, yet we are all "addicted" to food, meaning we are dependent on food for our survival. The term "eating disorders" instead describes the condition of suffering around this necessary dependency.

When our food, water and air are polluted, processed, and devitalized, or when we are removed from nature and bombarded with sensory stimuli, our prāṇa is disturbed. When we are under stress we shift into the fight or flight response and our breathing becomes fast and shallow. These disruptions to the flow of prāṇa deplete our body's

reserves of this life-force, which can lead to fatigue and exacerbate muscle tension. Disturbed prāṇa leads to a feeling of emptiness that somehow needs to be filled. When we experience challenges to prāṇa, we seek to fill this emptiness in a variety of ways:

1. If we are energy/prāṇa-deficient, we seek stimulation.
2. If we are hyperactive and constantly on the go, we seek sedation.
3. If the flow of prāṇa is blocked and we are in pain, we self-medicate.
4. If we are under stress, we often seek instant gratification through our senses.

These coping mechanisms: stimulation, sedation, medication, and instant gratification, are fully supported and even encouraged in our modern world of overdrive and hyper-sensory stimulation. The short-term pain relief created, however, is outweighed by the long-term progression of disturbed prāṇa that can lead to depression, mental stagnation, denial, and addiction.

In YoR we investigate ways in which our prāṇa is deranged and suggest haṭha-yoga, and especially *prāṇāyāma*, as therapy. Many rehabs offer haṭha-yoga classes. Breathing exercises should be emphasized as part of this practice; when stressful situations arise, it will likely be easier to quietly regulate the breath than practice *āsana*. This is particularly the case for YoR, which used to resist cravings when faced with triggers for relapse. Such triggers can arise



everywhere in our daily lives — social functions, criticism from our boss, disagreement with loved ones, etc. We also guide participants to select fresh, natural foods high in prāṇa, and instruct in the use of Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT/Tapping) which is a quick method of alleviating craving intensity that reflects back to the wisdom of *marma* therapy of Ayurveda.

Here is a comment from one of our students on her understanding of prāṇa:

When my prāṇa is free-flowing I feel connected to the earth . . . connected to myself (I can believe the good in me — and I can believe in being of benefit to others). I feel connected to the tapestry of humankind (past, present and future) . . . and I feel creative . . . When my prāṇa is not free-flowing all of the above become congested.

This brings us to our third tenet of YoR: **Life is Relationship**. Most of our psychological pain and suffering revolves around relationship problems. In YoR we investigate what aspect of our relationships may have led us to our addictive behaviors (children of addicts), or indeed, may be our addiction (codependency and sex and love addictions). According to yoga, the heart cannot find any ultimate happiness solely in a human relationship; this can only be found in the proper relationship with God or the cosmic spirit. Hence *bhakti-yoga* is an important healing tool. *Bhakti-yoga* rests upon a personal connection with God — not an external God but the God within our own hearts, our inner Self that is the Self of all.

Devotion describes our internal relationship with our idea of divinity. This extends to our current relationships, which also offer an opportunity to be devoted: to our parents/partner/children/community, etc.

Expanding our idea of relationships, we look at the way we relate with everything in our life, from our relationship with food and our senses, to our community, the seasons, Mother Earth, etc. We begin to increase our awareness of how we take in the world and our environment. What leads to healthy feelings of comfort, security, safety and satisfaction? On the

other hand, what leaves us feeling empty, fearful, anxious, angry or stressed?

Here is another YoR student sharing on this topic:

I have found in my own recovery that this issue of relationship is intimately linked with my alcohol addiction . . . I find that this deeper layer of healing is much more complicated (and rewarding) than simply removing drugs and alcohol from my life. My issues stemmed from witnessing and experiencing violence in my childhood. The physical abuse was not particularly severe, but it had a profound effect on me. Even more damaging was emotional abuse. Again it was not severe (and not intentional . . . my mother was mentally ill) but it warped my sense of security. Getting sober was my ticket to inner peace; I found the 12 steps, counseling, and yoga were my recipe for wholeness. It is a continual work in progress but I no longer have to drink or use drugs to cope with daily life. I feel lucky that when I went to treatment [for alcoholism] I was also diagnosed with codependency, male dependence, romance and relationship addiction, and Adult Children of Alcoholics issues. I've been diving into healing on all these realms ever since."

Our fourth tenet in YoR is **Life is Sweet**. Ayurveda has a diet based on six tastes (sweet, sour, salty, pungent, astringent, and bitter). These six tastes are how we receive the world through our sense of taste. Now consider that sweet is our first taste in life (mother's milk). Most "acting out" around food is a craving for the sweet taste. The sweet taste reminds us of our initial "union" with the mother: a feeling of safety, being nourished, protected, and nurtured. No wonder we seek it out again and again! Ayurvedic five sense therapies remedy our over-fixation on the sweet taste; we become aware of how we bring in sweetness through all our 5 senses, while moving away from our obsession with food and our oral fixation. We look at ways to sweeten our life through all the five senses.

Here again we also come to *bhakti-yoga*, which is known as the "sweet yoga". We connect with the sweetness of the sense experience through the



devotional practices, for example, incense, *prasāda* (sweet food offering), flowers, *mantras*, etc. We are simultaneously engaged in sweet, sattvic (harmonious, balanced), five-sense therapies and remembrance of the God within our own hearts. The practices allow us to ‘materialize’ our relationship with God — not just a thought, but using actual practices and rituals.

Let’s hear from another YoR student on how they apply this in their life:

After more than a year in recovery from alcoholism and codependency . . . I felt raw . . . keyed up . . . on edge. It was subtle. . . . I felt somewhat bombarded by life in sobriety, with all five senses wide open, alive and awake . . . generalized anxiety disorder.

Although I’d made the connection to the yogic teaching that to control the mind, one must control the senses. . . . I really didn’t know how to do that much beyond my regular haṭha-yoga practice, attendance at AA meetings, and Step work. I certainly didn’t have the awareness to understand that what I was doing in my daily life in all five of the senses directly affected and contributed to my uneasiness. . . . I found relief through the. . . . statement Life is Sweet. I set about the practice of sweetening all five of my senses. I’m lucky enough to live in one of the sweetest places in the universe. . . . I’ve begun to drive . . . a little slower and really take in the natural beauty. I pause at sunsets and tune into the sound of rain on the rooftop. I started clipping fresh roses from my year-round garden and always have colorful bouquets throughout the house. I added an altar to my desk where I spend a good deal of time. . . . I traded smoking

cigarettes for aromatherapy and the television remote-control for a good book. I walk away from gossip and clear my head by chanting a mantra. I’ve started taking more time each day to play with my dog, who is . . . sweetness itself and makes me feel good every time.

These are just a few new behaviors I’ve picked up, but it has made a huge difference in how I feel . . . it has allowed me to tap into my creativity and celebrate the abundance of sweetness available in life. Practicing sweetness is an infinite joy! Holding the intention of sweetening my senses is in itself a sweet practice because it has softened my mind and encouraged the flow of grace.

Today, that underlying unease is, for the most part, gone. But when I do begin to feel off center, I have a whole new delightful bag of tricks to choose from. I feel grounded, joyful, calm and peaceful and a deeper connection to this beautiful thing called life.

Our next tenet **Life is Love** is connected to Life is Sweet because in Ayurvedic nutritional therapy, sweet has the psychological effect as love. As we are drawn toward mood-manipulation through people and food, we can recognize and accept that we are really looking to reconnect with the sweetness of life; we are really looking for love. Not the notion of love as a messy, emotional affair, but connection to the deep inextinguishable flame of love in our heart. The urge to love and be loved is powerful, and fortunately the spiritual path of bhakti-yoga is based upon this unquenchable longing. It allows us to recognize that all forms of love ultimately serve our search for God.

The goal of all recovery/spiritual paths is to transform our awareness from separation to unity. In unity, we perceive only love, express only love, become only love. Let’s go back to some of the words given to us in answer to “What do you long for?” Respondents often say they long for peace, love, connection, and for a sense of belonging. That is an interesting word because it brings us back to Life is Longing, which can be re-phrased as “life is belonging”. Our fundamental need is for love, and we may be trying to manipulate/control our

environment or behavior to get the love from other people that we desire. For this we forgive ourselves and we bring in both *bhakti-* and *karma-yoga*. We ARE love, we are spirit embodied, and God is love. Love and serve, serve and love; what we love we serve, like the horse and carriage they go together.

Our final tenet is **Life is Progress**. Life is the wheel that keeps turning. Even as we abstain from our acting out behavior, life will not suddenly become trouble-free. So we must “keep coming back”: back to the mat, to the meetings, and to the meditation practice. There is no standing still in this scheme of life. Here we are helped by a study of *karma* and *dharma*. Karma, the universal law of action and reaction, tells us we will reap the results of our past actions. Some karmas are now “ripe” and we are experiencing them in our lives today. This is one of the fundamental philosophies of yoga. Although things that happen in life seem completely random, this universal law is always operating, and no one escapes from it. An investigation into karma will help us to understand and accept our life circumstances. We must also consider dharma, or right living and right action in the world. Karma and dharma are very closely linked together. Dharma encompasses “what you are here for”: your life purpose and what you are doing in the world. After years of self-destructive behavior, people in recovery will often admit they are surprised to still be here amongst the living! Yet they are still here. Hence, dharma becomes a question for them and the issue of livelihood is of great importance. Vedic astrology offers great help when investigating one’s personal dharma by shedding light onto our own individual path.

As mentioned previously, we are taking an integrated Vedic healing approach in YoR. This involves integration of the six tenets into one overall program for healing and rehabilitation. Below is a summary of the six tenets of YoR, and the corresponding suggested therapies for each “root issue”:

1. **Life Is Longing:** All Yogas
2. **Life is Prāṇa:** Haṭha-yoga, prāṇāyāma, prāṇa in diet, EFT/marma therapy
3. **Life is Relationship:** Bhakti-yoga

4. **Life is Sweet:** Bhakti-yoga and Ayurvedic five sense therapies to return to all five of our senses
5. **Life is Love:** Bhakti-yoga and karma-yoga (what you love, you serve)
6. **Life is Progress:** “Keep coming back”, care not cure, practice, karma and dharma (Jyotiṣa)

These six tenets of YoR help us begin to track the roots of our addictive and self-destructive behaviors. The idea is to restore wholeness with a holistic system, looking at all the facets of possible cause and seeing which are more pertinent for us. Participants are familiarized with the concepts of self-healing and self-care integrated with the full spectrum of Ayurveda, yoga, and Vedic astrology, and how these all relate to the principles of the twelve steps. This program is the foundation work for many of the people in recovery in our society. Participants often grasp these concepts with ease, and quickly connect how the program recognizes both their humanity and divinity, thus helping them have a deeper understanding of themselves and each other.

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