

## Herbs for the Practice of Yoga

### Herbology for Yogis

Traditional Yoga has always rested on a special yogic diet and special yogic herbs to go along with it. Yoga postures are something that we do, an expression of our energy. This depends upon how we feed ourselves, what provides the fuel for our energy production.

Herbs are powerful aids in the practice of yoga. They are useful not only for treating diseases and for rejuvenation but for awakening all our higher faculties. Anyone involved in yoga should consider taking helpful herbs on a regular basis. Yogis commonly have taken herbs to aid in their practice and to stimulate both prana and the higher mind.

Many of the oriental tonic herbs becoming popular in this country today, like ginseng and *ashwagandha*, are excellent for yoga practice because they increase our deeper vital energies (chi or prana). Such herbs possess overall strengthening properties for the muscles and nerves, especially helpful for vegetarians who may need a deeper form of nutrition. But even commonly available herbs and spices like ginger, turmeric or licorice have value for yoga practice. Herbs are important adjuncts that can catalyze processes that otherwise may be difficult to achieve.

We can all benefit from a daily usage of herbs. Our daily herbs may be as important as our daily bread. The effects of herbs, however, do not manifest immediately. Like food, the benefits from herbs accrue over time and require the right diet and lifestyle regimens to support them. For this reason, we must give herbs the proper circumstances in which to work and not simply treat them like drugs. Note that this chapter will not discuss the background of ayurvedic herbology, the preparation of herbs or related issues. These can be found in other books on Ayurveda.<sup>1</sup> We will focus on relevant herbs for yoga practice.

## Herbs and Soma

According to the Vedic view, the sap of herbs contains an powerful life essence called soma. The soma from plants can combine with ojas, which is the soma or life-essence of the body, and boost it to a higher level of activity. This healing essence of plants reacts with the plasma (*rasa*) in the body, creating a superior form of plasma to nurture and rejuvenate other tissues. It creates an exhilarating effect that promotes healing and transformative processes on all levels.

Some botanists have looked for an original soma plant, as if soma was only a single herb. They are making a mistake. Vedic texts mention many different types of soma plants, and soma is the essence of all plants. They commonly equate soma with honey (*madhu*), which itself is produced from the essence of plants through their pollen. Soma, therefore, refers to various special essences (*soma rasas*) that are found more in some plants than others but exist throughout the plant kingdom.

Classical ayurvedic texts like the *Susruta Samhita* mention twenty-four soma plants and eighteen soma-like plants.<sup>ii</sup> The *Atharva Veda*<sup>iii</sup> mentions, among soma-producing plants, grains like barley, herbs likes *durva* and nervines like cannabis (*bhang*). Kushta (*Saussurea lappa*) is another plant commonly mentioned along with soma.<sup>iv</sup> Ephedra (*Ma huang*) has been used as a soma substitute, particularly by the ancient Persians who followed a similar religion to the Vedic Hindus. Soma is a general plant essence, not a particular species. Soma-type ingredients are most common in tonic and nervine herbs. Traditionally in India, various members of the lily and orchid family were used for this purpose because of their strong nutritive and nervine properties and their abundant juice.

Soma ingredients are most prevalent among plants growing in the mountains, particularly by streams and lakes. Kashmir and its Manasa (Dal) lake, the upper Indus around Ladakh, and Mount Kailas and Lake Manasarovar in Tibet were considered to be the best soma regions. High altitudes impart a special prana to plants that allows them to transmit cosmic and astral influences that are more accessible in mountain regions. Any mountain-grown plants tend to have more soma or vital juice. This is well known in most native healing traditions.

Soma is a very volatile substance, however. It is found mainly in wild plants, freshly picked. Ayurveda always considers that the fresh juice of the plant has the strongest healing properties. This is because it contains the most soma. Even plants that contain soma ingredients can lose these if they are not taken fresh or prepared so as to endure. This is an important issue in herbalism today because wild plants are hard to get and it is also hard to preserve their potency. In terms of soma, the quality of herbs is as important as their specific nature.

Soma plants were prepared by first crushing the juice. This was then mixed or cooked with milk, ghee, yogurt, barley, honey or sugar cane juice and sometimes fermented, as many different types of soma preparations existed. They were sometimes prepared with metals like gold, just as ayurvedic herbs in India are today. Such alchemical somas were the basis of later alchemical and tantric medicines. Soma was designed to transform the base metal of our worldly nature to the gold of spirituality. This is not just a symbol. The base metal is the physical body; the gold is the purified subtle body. Soma was used to help awaken and energize the subtle body. Some soma preparations were used for spiritual purposes, some for healing purposes and some for both.

Plants also contain a special form of agni or the vegetable fire that allows them to digest light through photosynthesis. The agni of plants, which are pranic creatures, connects to pranagni, the agni of prana in the human body, warming and stimulating the life-force. Generally, spicy herbs with their naturally hot potency contain more agni energy, particularly spicy nervines like calamus, *pippali* or *shankha pushpi*. The combination of herbs high in agni and herbs high in soma works well for inner development. Agni-dominant herbs help purify, extract and digest soma herbs.

There are as many forms of soma as there are of agni. Each kosha has its own soma or nectar, which is the best type of food for it. Herbs provide soma for the body and prana, creating a special brain secretion that promotes contentment and nourishes the higher brain centers. This secretion is reflected as a certain form of saliva produced during pranayama.

The soma essence of plants is better transmitted if herbs are prepared along with ritual, mantra and meditation, which create a vehicle for the astral energy of the plant. Mantra is another form of agni that helps catalyze the soma ingredients in plants.

### **Herbs and Prana**

Herbs mainly work at the level of pranamaya kosha, the vital energy or pranic body. Their effect is at a subtler level than food and at a heavier level than mental and sensory influences. Herbs therefore link body and mind together via the prana. They stimulate the flow of prana through the channels and nadis. The subtle body itself with its various chakras is like a tree with different branches. Herbs facilitate movement of energy through this plant. They work to catalyze pranic processes both of growth and elimination. They aid prana in its job of keeping us healthy, strong, and aware.

### **Herbs for the Body and Hatha Yoga**

All herbs that deal with physical health issues have some potential use in yoga practice. Here we will focus on the most important types, which are those that aid in asana practice.

1. Herbs to increase flexibility, promote circulation and stimulate the movement of energy. Such herbs aid in the proper performance of asanas by improving musculoskeletal function and coordination. They are usually classified as anti-rheumatic or anti-arthritis agents. They are mainly herbs for hatha yoga.

Typical herbs: guggul, shallaki, myrrh, nirgundi, turmeric, saffron, Siberian ginseng, angelica, kava kava, dasha mula (ayurvedic formula).

These are usually taken with honey and warm water or with spicy stimulants like ginger and cinnamon to increase their effects. They do better if supplemented with oil massage, particularly with medicated sesame oil formulas, or with sweating therapies and saunas.

2. Herbs to increase physical energy and vitality. They strengthen ojas and through it promote soma, which is the higher form of ojas or our vital essence. They are usually tonic and rejuvenative agents, with strong nutritive properties, strengthening also the reproductive system. They build stamina and endurance, affording steadiness in yoga postures and in pranayama.

Typical herbs: ashwagandha, amalaki, shatavari, bala, vidari, ginseng, dioscorea, kapikacchu, lotus seeds, licorice, saw palmetto, fo ti.

These are usually taken with milk, raw sugar, ghee and other nutritive items to boost their strengthening powers. They combine well with raw (unheated) honey, particularly if it is fresh (less than six months old). They are best taken along with a nutritive vegetarian diet (like the anti-vata diet). A few spices should be added to them, like ginger and cinnamon, to aid in their digestion as they tend to be heavy.

3. Herbs for cooling and cleansing the body. These herbs remove toxins from the blood, the tissues and internal organs. They are usually bitter or astringent in taste and may contain large amounts of chlorophyll.

Typical herbs: aloe gel, guduchi, gentian, barberry, gotu kola, brahmi, plantain, dandelion, comfrey leaf, nettles, yarrow, yellow dock.

These herbs are taken with ghee, aloe gel, honey and other reducing agents. They are often combined with raw food diets, green juices, and other detoxification measures.

### **Herbs for the Five Pranas**

The key to healing at an inner level is keeping the five pranas moving properly. Herbs aid in this process. Below are typical herbs for stimulating the five pranas. Some herbs are good for more than one prana. These categories overlap somewhat the herbs for body and mind, because prana works on both levels.

Prana: Spicy diaphoretic herbs that increase our power of inhalation, open the head and sinuses, stimulate the mind and senses, and improve the appetite: cinnamon, sage, calamus, mint, thyme, tulsi, eucalyptus, ephedra, cloves, pippali, shilajit.

Apana: Mild laxative herbs that increase elimination and cleanse the downward channels, aiding in the absorption of Prana through the large intestine: triphala, haritaki, psyllium, flax seed, castor oil, aloe gel, cascara sagrada, asafoetida, hingashtak (ayurvedic formula).

Samana: Spicy herbs that aid in digestion and absorption through the small intestine: cardamom, fennel, ginger, cayenne, mustard, cumin, basil, black pepper, nutmeg, trikatu (ayurvedic formula).

Vyana : Spicy and bitter herbs that promote circulation both through the heart, the blood and the musculoskeletal system: cinnamon, nirgundi, arjuna, elecampane, guggul, saffron, turmeric, guduchi, Siberian ginseng, angelica, kava kava.

Udana: Mainly spicy and astringent herbs that strengthen the voice and stop cough, as well as increase vitality and power of effort. Many herbs for prana work here as well, particularly those that stop cough: calamus, bayberry, elecampane, lobelia, tulsi, haritaki, peppermint, mullein, vasa, coltsfoot, cherry bark, licorice.

### **Herbs for the Mind and Meditation**

Many herbs possess nervine properties and action on the mind. They can be divided into several main categories and have a usage for the higher yogas.

1. Herbs to stimulate the mind and senses and improve perception. These open the channels, increase cerebral circulation and remove mucus from the head. They increase perception and discrimination, facilitating the process of insight and meditation. They are similar to herbs to move prana.

Typical herbs: calamus, tulsi, basil, pippali, bayberry, ephedra (ma huang), sage, elecampane.

These herbs are taken along with warm water and honey (particularly honey that is older, which has more drying properties) to improve their effects. They are the main herbs used in nasya therapy.

2. Herbs to increase awareness and intelligence, strengthening in the mind. They are special tonic and building agents for the mind and nerve tissue, similar to the tonics for the body. They increase soma in the nervous system, helping us to gain concentration, contentment and joy and to overcome pain.

Typical herbs: shankha pushpi, brahmi, gotu kola, ashwagandha, haritaki, shatavari, bala, kapikacchu, arjuna, lotus seeds, shilajit.

These herbs, like the tonics for the body which they resemble, are usually taken along with warm milk, raw sugar, raw honey, ghee and other nutritive items to boost their strengthening powers.

3. Herbs for calming the mind. These are mild sedative and pain relieving agents, but also slow down the mind for meditation. They are less nutritive than the mind tonics and better for reducing anxiety and agitated nerves.

Typical herbs: jatamamsi, valerian, nutmeg, passion flower, kava kava, scullcap, lady's slipper, zizyphus seeds.

These herbs may be taken with other soothing agents like ghee or aloe gel to improve their calmative properties. Jatamamsi is regarded as the best.

## **Doshic Types and Yoga Practice**

Vata types: suffer from lack of flexibility, dryness and stiffness, and commonly develop arthritis. They benefit by herbs for improving flexibility, as well as by regular oil massage with sesame oil and its medicated varieties. Vatas also commonly suffer from low energy. They benefit by tonic herbs for improving energy, particularly ashwagandha.

Vata types have to be careful to keep apana balanced and often require a mild laxative like Triphala. However, since vata tends to disturb prana, herbs for the five pranas can be helpful for them, particularly pranic regulators like *tulsi* (holy basil). Vata people easily get ungrounded and unstable. They benefit by tonics of all types, particularly nervine tonics, along with herbs for calming the mind like jatamamsi and ashwagandha. They do best taking herbs with warm milk or with raw honey.

Pitta types: usually have internal heat and toxic blood that needs to be removed from the body for healing to occur. They benefit by cooling and detoxifying herbs like aloe gel, guduchi and barberry, along with green herbs and foods.

The mind itself is the seat of fire on a subtle level. Hence the mind and brain easily get overheated. Pittas need to keep their minds and emotions cool, avoiding emotions like anger that overheat the mind. For this, cooling-type nervines like gotu kola, brahmi, shatavari and jatamamsi are best. They do best taking herbs with milk or with aloe gel.

Kapha types: With their tendency towards stagnation, kapha types benefit by herbs to improve circulation, particularly guggul, myrrh and turmeric, which counter common kapha complaints like heart disease, diabetes, asthma and obesity. The best tonics for them are those that are not too heavy like shilajit, though they can benefit from ashwagandha or ginseng if their energy is very low.

Kapha, as mucus, blocks the channels and nadis of the head and subtle body. They benefit from herbs to stimulate the mind and senses. For this, various spicy herbs are recommended, particularly calamus, ginger and pippali, along with the use of the neti pot and nasya therapy. As their prana easily becomes blocked by mucus, kaphas benefit

from herbs for the five pranas, with the possible exception of the herbs for apana. They do best taking herbs with warm water or honey (over six months old).

### **Special Herbs for Yoga Practice**

Below are listed special, mainly Indian herbs for yoga practice. These are available through many herb or ayurvedic stores. The herb is given along with its taste (rasa), heating effect (*virya*) and post-digestive action (*vipaka*). VPK is action on Vata, Pitta and Kapha: + is increasing, - is decreasing, = is balancing or neutral. For more information, including dosage and preparation, consult *Yoga of Herbs*.

#### Arjuna/ Terminalia arjuna

astringent/ cooling / pungent

PK- V+

Arjuna is a tonic and rejuvenative for the heart that promotes vyana vayu and increases prana. It helps develop devotion and gives us the extra courage and energy for our spiritual practice, just as Arjuna was able to fight for dharma at the side of Lord Krishna.

#### Amalaki/ Emblica officinalis

all tastes but salty/ cooling/sweet

VPK=

Amalaki is a tonic and rejuvenative for all the tissues. It balances the doshas and increases ojas. Taken in the form of a jelly called *Chyavan Prash*, it is an excellent food for yoga practice and a good energy booster. It is a prime tonic for young children, pregnant women, the elderly and anyone in need of extra strength and stamina.

#### Aloe Vera

bitter, astringent, sweet/ cooling/ sweet

PK- V+

Aloe is an entire medicine chest in itself. Relative to yoga practice, it is excellent for cleansing the plasma, skin, blood and the liver, all the main physical and pranic systems. It has rejuvenative effects for the female reproductive system as well.

Ashwagandha/ Withania somnifera

bitter, sweet/ heating/ sweet

VK- P+

Ashwagandha is the best ayurvedic tonic for both body and mind. It strengthens and nourishes the muscles, tendons, bones and nerves and builds ojas and tejas, fortifying the immune system. It is good for joint and nerve pain and is specific for lowering anxiety. It counters insomnia, calms the mind and promotes concentration, meditation and deep sleep. Ashwagandha is excellent in sports medicine for increasing endurance and protecting the bones and joints from injury.

Bayberry/ Myrica nagi

pungent/ heating/ pungent

KV- P+

Bayberry is an excellent herb for clearing kapha from the head and throat and for stimulating the mind and senses. It strengthens prana and udana and helps counter colds, flu and sore throat. It can be used with or as a substitute for calamus for clearing the head and sinuses.

Calamus/ Acorus calamus

pungent, bitter/ heating/ pungent

KV- P+

Calamus, also known as sweet flag, is a stimulant to the mind and senses. It clears mucus from the head, throat and lungs. It improves digestion, but in large dosages it becomes an emetic. In Ayurveda it is mainly used to clear the subtle channels of toxins, phlegm and blockages. Calamus increases the powers of speech, reason and intelligence and sharpens discrimination. It is excellent for mantra and meditation. It aids in spiritual study and is said to increase knowledge of the higher Self.

Gotu Kola/ Brahmi

bitter, sweet, astringent/cooling/sweet

PK- V=

Brahmi is a close relative of gotu kola and is the preferable herb but gotu kola can be used as a substitute when brahmi is not available. Brahmi is a sedative, calmative, muscle relaxant and pain-relieving agent. It has diuretic, hemostatic, and alterative properties for toxic blood conditions and counters adrenal fatigue. It aids in controlling anger and attachment and for cooling and calming the mind. Its Sanskrit name, *brahmi*, reflects its usage to promote knowledge of Brahman, the cosmic reality.

Brahmi and its relatives grows wild in many tropical areas, including India and Hawaii. Brahmi juice taken in aloe juice is an excellent detoxifying agent for body and mind. Prepared as a medicated ghee, it is excellent for the liver and the nerves. Fresh brahmi leaves preserved in raw honey is a good soma-producing agent.

#### Guduchi (Amrit)/ *Tinospora cordifolia*

bitter, astringent, sweet/ hot/ sweet

VPK=

Guduchi removes heat and toxins from a deep level of the tissues and nerves. It also cools and cleanses the mind. It is a rejuvenative for pitta and balances tejas. It is an excellent tonic for the immune system, particularly important for countering chronic low grade fevers or difficult infections from Epstein Barre virus to AIDS. It increases our positive energy in conditions of debility-like chronic fatigue syndrome.

#### Guggul/ *Commiphora mukul*

pungent, bitter, astringent, sweet/ heating/sweet

KV- P=

Guggul promotes flexibility of the muscles, ligaments and bones and is a prime medicine for arthritis. It also strengthens the heart, lowers cholesterol and prevents heart attacks. It keeps the blood clean and sattvic so it can vitalize all the tissues. Guggul regulates blood sugar and counters diabetes (a common disease of yogis whose metabolism can go through unusual fluctuations). It combines well with triphala as an excellent cleanser for the plasma and blood.

### Jatamamsi/ Nardostachys jatamansi

bitter, astringent, sweet/ cooling/ sweet

VPK=

Jatamamsi is the best ayurvedic calmative herb, with soothing and strengthening properties for the brain and nervous tissue. It can be combined with ashwagandha as a brain tonic for vata and with cleansing agents like gotu kola for cooling the mind. Though related to valerian, it is a more balanced herb and easier to take. It improves our mental function and acuity rather than simply sedating it.

### Kapikacchu/ Mucuna pruriens

bitter, sweet/ warm/ sweet

KV- P+

Kapikacchu is a powerful tonic herb strengthening both ojas and tejas and the deeper tissues of the nerve and reproductive systems. It calms vata, particularly in conditions of tremors or paralysis owing to debility. It is a natural source of L-dopa, useful in treating Parkinson's disease. A bean, it makes a pleasant and invigorating food taken along with rice.

### Kava Kava/ Piper methysticum

pungent, bitter/ heating/ pungent

VK- P+

Kava kava improves circulation and relieves pain both to the musculoskeletal and nervous systems. It counters vata, promotes vyana, and facilitates rest, sleep and deep meditation. It helps promote a deep level of flexibility and detachment in both body and mind.

### Myrrh/ Commiphora myrrha

bitter, pungent, astringent, sweet/ heating/ sweet

KV- P+

Myrrh, like guggul and shallaki, is excellent for promoting circulation to the muscles, joints and bones, for stopping pain and healing injuries. It also cleanses the blood and plasma and facilitates menstruation, strengthening the female reproductive system.

Nirgundi/ Vitex negundo

bitter, pungent/ heating/ pungent

VK- P+

Nirgundi is an excellent herb for ayurvedic massage oils and for steam therapy, stimulating vyana and vayu. It loosens toxins in the bones and joints and helps remove them from the body, countering pain and stiffness and reducing swelling. Useful with guggul and other herbs for improving flexibility and circulation.

Phyllanthus/ Phyllanthus niruri

bitter, astringent, sweet/ cooling/ pungent

VPK=

Phyllanthus is a tonic and rejuvenative herb for the liver and the blood and has been found useful in treating both chronic and acute hepatitis. It is good for deep-seated toxins in the organs that affect us on a subtle level and cause chronic diseases.

Prawal/ Red Coral Powder

sweet/cooling/sweet

PV- K+

Prawal is red coral powder, prepared either as an oxide (*bhasma*) or triturated through rose water (*pishiti*). It has excellent properties for strengthening the bones, teeth, gums and hair. It counters pitta and builds ojas.

Sallaki/ Boswellia serrata

bitter, sweet, astringent/ cooling/ pungent

VPK=

Sallaki is a resin related to guggul and myrrh and used for similar purposes of cleansing the blood and countering arthritic pain and stiffness. It also aids in the healing of soft

tissue injuries. Its cooling nature makes it particularly good for inflamed and swollen joints where there is pitta involvement.

#### Shankha Pushpi/ Evolvus alsinodes

astringent / warm/ sweet

VPK=

Shankha pushpi is an excellent stimulant and tonic for the mind. It improves memory, concentration and perception, and aids in the rejuvenation of the brain. It stimulates our higher cerebral functions, improving our overall intelligence and creativity. *Sarasvata churna*, a powder prepared with this herb, is widely used in attention deficit disorder and helps prevent loss of memory.

#### Shatavari/ Asparagus racemosus

sweet, bitter/cooling/sweet

PV- K+

Shatavari is calming to the heart and increases love and devotion. Like ashwagandha, it is a prime tonic for all general usages but has a more specific action on the female system. It produces a higher quality plasma and guards against dehydration. It counters fever and acidity.

#### Shilajit

astringent, pungent, bitter/ warm/ pungent

KV- P+

Shilajit is a mineral pitch from the Himalayas and carries the healing power of these great mountains. Shilajit possesses great curative powers and is considered capable of treating many diseases, particularly those of the aging process. It is an important rejuvenative and tonic particularly for kapha, vata, and the kidneys, as in the case of people who have long suffered from diabetes and asthma. It can be taken for general health maintenance and is good for those who do much mental work or practice yoga.

#### Triphala

all tastes but salty/ neutral/ sweet

VPK=

Triphala, an important ayurvedic laxative formula, has an important usage in yoga. It controls the apana vayu, the downward moving air, and aids in the absorption of prana in the large intestine. It helps balance the metabolism and provides nutrition for the bones and nerves. Triphala facilitates the absorption of pure prana from our food, thus allowing for a more complete practice of pranayama or development of the life-force.

### Tulsi (Holy Basil)/ Ocimum sanctum

pungent, sweet/ heating/ pungent

KV- P+

Tulsi is a form of basil that is an important herb for clearing the mind and brain and for increasing both wisdom and devotion. It promotes our higher pranas and is excellent for colds, flu, and sinus allergies. It is good to put a little tulsi in the water that one drinks.

### Types of Ginseng

Siberian ginseng (*Eleutherooccus senticosus*) is widely used for improving athletic performance, promoting elasticity of the joints and tendons, preventing injury during exercise and countering arthritis, particularly the chronic and degenerative type. These uses make it very helpful for asana practice.

Korean Ginseng builds chi (prana or the power of breath) and gives added endurance as well as increasing the overall adaptability of both body and mind. It promotes longevity and aids in rejuvenation. This makes it good for deeper yoga practices, but some people find it too stimulating and should be careful with it.

American ginseng may be preferable over the oriental as it is less likely to overheat the system. It helps prevent dehydration and is also a good antifatigue agent. It is good to take in the summer or for pitta constitutions.

### Natural Soma Formula

ashwagandha, shatavari, kapikacchu, arjuna — 1 part each

brahmi, calamus, tulsi, licorice — 1/4 part each

Cook two tsps. of powdered herbs in two cups warm milk along with 1 tsp. raw sugar and 1 tsp. ghee. Take one cup in the morning and evening along with 1/4 tsp. of cardamom powder. Or mix the powder of the herbs in raw honey and let it set for a week. Then take a half-teaspoon morning and evening, or as needed to counter low energy and fatigue.

### **Aromatic Herbs, Oils and Incense**

Aromatic herbs have powerful effects on the mind and prana, activating the higher brain centers. Other aromatic herbs help calm the mind and opening the heart. Such aromatic herbs can be used in the form of teas, essential oils, inhalants, nasya or as incense.<sup>v</sup>

Spicy aromatics like gingers, mints and sages are better at stimulating the mind and promoting insight and perception good for the yoga of knowledge or for Raja Yoga. They also help clear the head and sinuses and stimulate the flow of prana. They increase pranagni or the agni of the pranic sheath, which is good for pranayama.

Flower fragrances like jasmine and rose are better at opening the heart for devotion. Flower fragrances calm the outer mind and its emotional and sensory overloads, connecting us to a deeper level of feeling. They build ojas at a subtle level.

Spicy Aromatics: camphor, eucalyptus, peppermint, sage, thyme, cinnamon, ginger, tea tree oil, wintergreen, tulsi

Sweet Flower Fragrances: jasmine, rose, saffron, sandalwood, champak, iris, lotus, frangipani, honeysuckle

### **Oil Massage and Yoga**

In addition to herbs, we should not forget the value the external application of oils, particularly sesame oil, for counteracting rigidity of the joints and muscles and nourishing the deeper tissues of the body. Ayurvedic medicated oils, made by cooking special herbs in a sesame oil base, are especially important in this manner. They not only aid in yoga postures but treat diseases of the bones and nerve tissue. Oil massage can allow us to move into asanas that may have otherwise been impossible for us to do. It can help ground the prana so that our pranayama practices do not dry out the nervous system.

Most of us can benefit from oily massage on a regular basis as part of our lifestyle regimens, particularly vata types.

Sesame oil has vata-counteracting properties. It aids in the flow of prana through the nadis and channels and increases ojas.

Coconut oil has pitta-counteracting properties. It is particularly useful to apply to the head, which tends to become overheated.

Mustard oil has kapha-counteracting properties. It is particularly useful to apply to the chest and lung region where kapha accumulates.

Ghee counters pitta and vata. It is mainly used for skin rashes of a dry or inflammatory nature which would be aggravated by other oils that are usually heating in nature.

### **Nasya and the Neti Pot**

The neti pot is a small pot with a narrow spout used to pour water through the nostrils when the head is tilted back. A small amount of salt, an eighth of a teaspoon or so, is added to the lukewarm water. Herbs and oils can be also added to the neti pot as well for special or enhanced action. These include sesame oil and nervine herbs like brahmi, calamus, tulsi or ginger.

One can also snuff the powder of various herbs like ginger or calamus to clear the sinuses. Or one can put ayurvedic oils, like medicated sesame oils, into the nostrils. The medicated oils are probably the best. They can cure many sinus allergies and also counter sinus headaches, dizziness, vertigo and brain fatigue. Yoga students should use ayurvedic nasya oils on a daily basis. They can do so after the neti pot or in place of it.

### **Pancha Karma**

Pancha karma means the five purificatory practices. It consists of therapeutic enemas (*basti*), purgatives (*virechana*), emetics (*vamana*), nasal medications (*nasya*), and blood cleansing (*rakta moksha*) to eliminate excess doshas from the body. These follow a preparatory practice of oil massage (*snehana*) and steam therapy (*svedana*) to loosen up the toxins and bring them back to the digestive tract for their removal.

Purgatives increase apana (downward motion) to reduce pitta. Emetics stimulate udana (upward motion) to reduce kapha. Nasya opens the head to promote prana. Blood-cleansing stimulates the flow of blood through vyana to reduce pitta. Bastis or enemas calm apana in order to calm vata. In this way pancha karma works on all five pranas.

Pancha karma radically remove toxins not only from the physical body but also from the subtle body. It has a powerful cleansing and rejuvenating effect upon the bones, muscles and nerves, senses and mind. Therefore pancha karma is a helpful procedure for anyone on a yogic path, not only for asana but for pranayama and meditation. Pancha karma can be done as part of a detoxification program, to start a deeper level of practice, or as a regular measure to prevent the toxins from accumulating.<sup>vi</sup>

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i Note *Yoga of Herbs* in this regard.

ii *Susruta Samhita Chikitsa Sthanam* 29 and 30.4.

iii *Atharva Veda* XI.6.15.

iv *Atharva Veda* XIX.39.5.

v Please examine *Ayurveda and the Mind* for more information on this fascinating topic. Note bibliography.

vi For more information please examine *Ayurveda and Pancha Karma* by Dr. Sunil Joshi.