

## The Integration of Ayurveda into Yoga of Recovery

*Durga Leela*

Yoga of Recovery (YoR) integrates the wisdom of yoga and Ayurveda with modern recovery tools, including the principles of 12-step programs. It is open to all who are looking to overcome self-destructive or addictive tendencies. It has been offered as workshops, retreats, and certificate courses around the United States and internationally since 2005. This powerful combination is proving to be “the evolution of the solution”—offering individuals a truly empowering personal program of recovery.

So what does Ayurveda add to this program? YoR offers a unique perspective and presentation of Ayurveda. The topics selected from this vast system of knowledge are chosen to make Ayurveda instantly relatable, accessible, and current for people in recovery, to help shift their life trajectory. I truly believe Ayurveda is the best system of behavioral health care for all modern chronic diseases. The toolbox is full and many are thankful that Ayurveda offers these tools and suggestions beyond the usual diet and exercise dogma we’ve been offered for years from the health and fitness industry. Ayurveda offers general advice for all of us; YoR presents this information in a way that allows the person to draw out what will help them most at their particular point of the recovery path—which is a lifetime journey.

**Our understanding of our suffering defines the nature of our solution.**

My own path in founding YoR stems from being a child of an alcoholic, becoming alcoholic myself in my teens, finding yoga in my mid-20s, a few suicide attempts, and losing my mother to alcoholism

when I was 32 years old. Shortly after that, I was fired from a job I was headhunted into. Then I “did a geographic”—moving from London to Lake Tahoe to take a year off and sort myself out. But “wherever you go, there you are,” and after nine months in the United States, my new life was in shambles.

I once again felt desperate, but this time I took myself to a meeting of AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) and experienced almost instant relief from my obsession with alcohol. What brought the transformative experience of sobriety to become a sustainable, ongoing process was the ‘blossoming’ of that foundation of sobriety, service, and fellowship (the three pillars of 12-step principles) to a life of balance through Ayurveda and a life of purpose through yoga. These three modalities are available to me in every moment of my life in the small everyday choices and larger life decisions, and I get the opportunity to share aspects of that regularly through the Yoga of Recovery.

Initially there were two main aspects of Ayurveda I found fascinating to my path of recovery—fascinating enough to bring me to study, practice, and teach some aspect of Ayurveda every day for the last 15 years. The two topics that most intrigued me initially were the idea of constitution, and the causes of disease according to Ayurveda.



Ayurveda is a humanistic and person-centered medicine. Allopathy is a disease-based medicine model that struggles to find an adequate, comprehensive description of the addiction problem. Addiction is a “significant social plague” that takes many forms in our modern-day society. It is bio-psycho-social-emotional-cultural-economic-political, etc.

It is a disease of spirit, mind, and body and for that we need an understanding of ourselves at each of these levels and also an understanding of the disease at each aspect of our being so we can live the solution.

In my experience, in early recovery I often struggled with my emotional reactions and lack of energy. I also lacked a sufficient sense of self, so I constantly compared myself with others around me. The 12 Steps talk about our habit of comparing your insides to others’ outsides—I understood that and it helped a lot but I just did not understand my own system very well—it was in need of repair. I was attempting to feel better by implementing diet and exercise principles offered by the “experts”—the “one size fits all” school of wellness, and most did not suit me at all. I always felt I was “lacking in something,” that I could just not commit or sustain as well as others so I could not be as energetic or happy as they seemed to be.

I resonated with the idea of constitution immediately, and could easily relate to the apparent differences I saw in both the physical structures and mindsets of the friends around me. It very quickly allowed me to release self-judgment and come to self-acceptance. It resolved many of my “shoulds”—I should be less angry, I should be more energetic, I should be more successful etc. Also, it helped me release judgment around others—they should be more considerate, they should not start things and not finish them, they should be less dramatic, etc. I also saw how my compatibility with others was sometimes drawn from their constitutional proclivities balancing out my own, and how my difficulty with some personalities were a clash of those tendencies. “Like increases Like” is the basis of Ayurvedic medicine. I felt this at the level of relationships, especially in rooms filled with people suffering from the “character defects” that underlie all addictions—the one that is most ubiquitous being our tendency toward codependency—our ability to see in the other what is wrong but not be able to see or deal with it in ourselves.

The fact that Ayurveda offered solutions for every aspect of this relational problem with self and others was miraculous to me. I love how Claudia Welch recently stated the Ayurvedic principle of “opposites

### AA Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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**“With Ayurveda it feels like I’ve come home”: Rachael, 8 years in recovery from alcoholism through the 12 Steps:**

I asked Rachael: *what are you looking for from Ayurveda? How did you think it could help you? What most appeals to you?*

Her answer covers many aspects of how she has experienced not just her addiction, but also her habits in recovery. She is seeking “the middle way” of Ayurveda, which is sensible to her. In YoR we teach how we can be sense-able in our recovery! She has experienced her nature as extreme—both in addiction and recovery. Her driving internal message was “more, more, more.” One definition we use for addiction in YoR is “when more is never enough.” Rachael was interested in eastern philosophy (yoga and mindfulness) even during her addicted behaviors. Her belief is that when she adds these tools to her 12-step recovery principles, she has the perfect tools. Yoga and meditation help her find the inner consciousness and deepen her connection with her higher power. This is a fundamental relapse prevention suggestion of the 12 Steps—daily inventory, prayer and meditation, and service being the lynchpins of long-term recovery given in the “maintenance steps of 10, 11, and 12.” In YoR we teach how these really establish Sattva in our life, the stabilizing force that allows us to build resilience against triggers for relapse. At 8 years sober, Rachael tells of both her own and others’ (both recovering people and the general population) being somewhat “manic” in their self-care regimens—whether it be running, going to the gym, or becoming obsessed and strict with the latest fad diet. In the rooms of her 12-step groups she’s encountered extreme people (one of the terms is “Big Book Thumpers”). With so many people exemplifying “extreme” behavior around her, she was easily influenced to feel this was the way to tackle her new life in recovery too. However, this can only end in exhaustion as seen from the definition of addiction given by David Frawley: “Addictions are a form of mental disorder. They occur from too much *tamas* or inertia in the mind. Often caused by excess *rajas* or mental disturbance, which is compensated for by providing an artificial calm.”

Rachel says, “I had tried almost everything, then I came across Ayurveda while on vacation in Bali. It calmed me and it was simple. Ayurveda tells me not to be extreme. I can relax and trust myself, obey the odd food craving and not hold myself to such an enforced and rigid diet and exercise routine. If I really want some chocolate or pizza, then I just have it, in moderation; better that than to obsess about it for the next few hours. I feel it harps back to traditional ways—our old style of living where you’ve got your food and herbal medicines and what you do when you get up in the morning—you do it and you leave it there, and go about your day without obsessing about every detail. It’s been an amazing circular thing for me; it’s taken me back to the comfort of home cooked food, things that used to pacify me as a child. **With Ayurveda it feels like I’ve come home.** I keep it simple—my attitude to life, my spirituality, my general health. I have a routine, I get up and pray and make my bed, oil my skin, meditate then shower, etc. Ayurveda offers me a natural way of living, a comfortable routine. It’s brilliant because it is moderate which is the best mantra for a person in recovery—“**moderate not manic**”—now I can more easily see when I am moving toward old behaviors, doing things to the extreme, and I can also see it others and choose my company and advice from people who live a more moderate life!”

reduce” to a profound healing statement of “**treat complex with simplicity.**” So many areas of my life were out of balance and Ayurvedic medicine gave me a simple, cumulative solution encapsulated in one of the words for health, “*svastha*”—to be established in the self. For this I turned my attention within to gauge my own reaction to my lifestyle choices rather

than blindly following more “good advice” from the “experts.” I learned more about myself in just a few months than I had in the previous 30+ years and, like Rachael, I recognized my own inherent wisdom and experience as trustworthy guides on my recovery path. Knowledge of my constitution helped me identify my own “stress-signature” and what paci-



fied and aggravated that within me. I was becoming able to care for myself—balancing the life force within me through understanding simple qualities of dry/moist, heavy/light, mobile/stable, and cold/hot. I smile as I share this profound simplicity that health is elemental! We are all spirit embodied in an

elemental outfit—I can accept and work with the diversity of spirit coming through air, fire, or water types – seeing the similarities and honoring the differences allowing me to live and let live.

The Ayurvedic view of disease then allowed me to move further into my solution. In the 12 Steps, addiction is described as a spiritual malady; Ayurveda describes all disease as “forgetting our true nature is spirit.” Dominated by the ego (sense of separateness and individuality), we live our lives as sensory beings. In the pursuit of pleasure through the senses we tend to overindulge. In yoga this is described as our spiritual ignorance.

This was very interesting to me as it fit with what I’d been told in AA—that addiction was a “spiritual malady” and that I was “spiritually sick.” I had never considered that prospect/explanation before entering AA. Until then I just thought I was weak and lacked willpower; the more efforts I made to

Ayurveda three-fold cause of disease	The Big Book of AA describes the problem of alcoholism as
1. Misuse of the senses;	1. A manifestation of an allergy which brings on the phenomenon of craving;
2. Misuse of the Intellect/ Crimes against wisdom;	2. Problem of mental control; Most powerful desire to stop drinking is of absolutely no avail; Control—obsession; Strangely insane;
3. Decay due to time	3. A progressive illness

stop drinking, the more I felt an utter failure, never being able to manage what I set out to do.

From there Ayurveda recognizes a three-fold cause and as soon as this was described to me I clearly recognized how this correlated with the definition of addiction from the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous:

When I learned this I knew I had found what I had been looking for. The cause was spiritual, mental, and physical and the effects worsened over time. This was how I had experienced all the suffering of addiction, both in myself and in others around me. It was very clear to me that this was what I and many addicts needed, a holistic system of medicine based in consciousness to treat the root cause of addictions. **Our understanding of our suffering defines the nature of our solution.** When I was 18 months sober, allopathic medical professionals offered me antidepressants for their diagnosis of clinical depression. I tried that but it did not match my understanding of the problem. Through YoR I guide people to undertake their own creative self-inquiry. Who they are, what spirituality is, how to care for themselves, and how to come

together in satsang (company of the wise/truth seekers/community) for ongoing mutual support.

YoR works with people who have sex addiction, eating disorders, codependents with no substance abuse, and others where substance abuse is present but it is not the primary presenting issue. I work with people 16–84 years old; those who are members of 12-step programs and those who are not. We offer help to those who want to come off the pharmaceuticals they have been prescribed but find they are now dependent on them. The program is also open to anyone who wants to learn lifestyle and stress management skills. It has also been recognized as a key component from people recovering from cancer.

The program is an integration of the philosophy of yoga and the physical yoga practices—hatha yoga, yoga nidra, restorative yoga, and pranayama. We also utilize the psychology of yoga and Ayurveda, using the model of the gunas: sattva, rajas, and tamas. We talk about the roots of the addictive behaviors: the main causative factor is the ego, the idea of having disconnection from spirit, disconnection from the life

**Dr Harikrishnan, Medical Director of Vaidyagram Ayurvedic Clinic in Coimbatore, India,** states that: “Addiction arises when we lose the purpose of our life. In vedic literature we are told we only get a human birth after several thousand other lives. The purpose of the human life is to evolve, to go to the further level. When you have a bigger purpose, this guides you better in how to live each day. The four goals of life: Dharma, Artha, Kama, and Moksha indicate the larger purpose that we hold to. These life goals help steady us when we encounter weakness in our mind and emotional problems. Overall the remedy for de-addiction is to increase Sattva. The gunas Rajas and Tamas are the causal factors in addictive behaviors. Ayurvedic lifestyle is key to de-addiction as it contributes to a Sattvic state of mind. We come to balance daily through remembrance of purpose, healthy diet choices combined with daily routines for self-care.”

In response to the question: “*If you are currently using in your addiction how do you get out?*” Dr. Harikrishnan replies: “We recommend cleansing the body through Pancha Karma—this eliminates the toxins and also allows you a break from the circumstances—time away to cleanse and calm down, introduce new practices, change your lifestyle and feel the effects of the new habits. It takes three months for food to go to the seventh tissue—within three months our body is completely changed, hence it is ideal to spend a minimum of six weeks to three months in a staged recovery process.” YoR offers Ayurvedic pancha karma retreats in India. The first stage is the deep cleanse; the second stage is learning both the principles and tools of Yoga and Ayurveda to help us make better decisions; and the third stage gives time to offer service to others—the best way to get out of self. This increases confidence and self-esteem and allows us to share the gifts of our recovery with others. We then go back to live our lives knowing that we have a purpose, feeling more calm, stronger, knowing our capacity, pacifying Vata by eating properly and applying oil daily. For those who choose to take the 12 Steps as part of their recovery path this can be summarized as participating in Step 3—participating in the care offered to us from our Higher Power.

force, trouble in relationships and seeking sensual stimulation externally, constantly chasing the highs then feeling depleted by that process. We describe our inherent psychology using the gunas—this is profoundly useful as we feel the effects of our rajasic lifestyles and more people are diagnosed with bipolar disorders. Understanding the imbalances and emotional states of rajas and tamas in the mind and their dynamic interplay, we correlate that to the description of the problem as “Restless, Irritable and Discontent” from the 12-step programs. We discuss the sattvic lifestyle choices that offer so much empowerment and hope, resilience to relapse and stress and connecting us with the potential for contentment, stability, self-trust, serenity, and peace. Even more, the promise of the spiritual path that we can go beyond suffering.

Recovery is an inside job; we can overcome even the toughest of life circumstances through acceptance and awareness. Ayurveda is well placed to meet us there—we can look at the stress/addictive tendencies of the doshic types, and track that to how stress affects Agni, the main determinant of our health. People recognize these imbalances and are greatly helped in resolving them through Ayurvedic nutritional advice—based in taste and the qualities and gratitude to the source of food rather than science of micronutrients and proteins.

People feel seen, and for something other than a pathology (the addict label), and they embrace this with considerable gratitude. One of the most rewarding classes to teach is YoR’s “One day at a time” session, based on the movement of the doshas through the day. We’ve all had days when we feel our life is still unmanageable when we are unsettled by a sleepless night, afternoon fatigue, or night-time hunger. Rather than this causing a cascade of bad decisions, we look at the clock, ascertain the dosha time of day, and pacify in a healthy way knowing this period will last only four hours. This also helps us set our waking and sleep hours to support us so we are not “swimming against the tide.”

All of this helps people to manage their own wellness and long-term emotional sobriety. It is “Ayurveda applied”—taught using the language of recovery, making Ayurveda instantly accessible. 12 Steps and physical yoga practice are widely available. **YoR teaches how to**

**embody recovery—Between the mat and the meeting** (during the other 22 hours of the day and night!).

YoR has been attended by people in recovery, addiction counselors, nurses, MFTs, social workers, ASAM psychiatrists, and yoga teachers across the country. We are delighted to offer this in places that have long-term stability and deep spirituality. It is important to invite people to experience this healing because the whole nation is addicted. There is a lot of vying for the business of acute treatment/rehab—many people who need recovery are never addressed by this model. YoR offers retreats to help one become steady in sobriety through basic simple daily lifestyle habits.

Details are found at [www.yogaofrecovery.com](http://www.yogaofrecovery.com), email [durga@yogaofrecovery.com](mailto:durga@yogaofrecovery.com)

Date	Event	Location
June 16–19, 2016	YoR 4-day retreat; and YoR 10-day Training Certification (June 16–26)	<u>Yogaville, Buckingham, VA</u>
July 8–10, 2016	YoR Weekend; and 7-day YoR Certificate Course (50 Hours: July 8–14)	Soul of Yoga, Encinitas, CA
Aug 11–14, 2016	YoR 4-day Retreat; and YoR 10-day Training Certification (Aug 11–21)	<u>Grass Valley, CA</u>
Sep 13–15, 2016	YoR at Santa Barbara Yoga Center	Santa Barbara, CA

**Durga Leela** is a practical, down-to-earth, and to-the-point speaker who has worked on her own path of recovery. She has a great sense of humor and a real warmth for understanding the trials and tribulations of our human condition. She is the founder of Yoga of Recovery, a comprehensive program that integrates Ayurveda and Yoga with recovery tools for a holistic mind, body, and spirit approach for all those affected by addiction and self-destructive behaviors. She is an RYT-500, Clinical Ayurvedic and Pancha Karma Specialist, trained both in the United States and India. She is the Director of the Ayurveda Programs at the Sivananda Yoga Farm in California and a professional member and conference speaker for the National Ayurvedic Medical Association (NAMA) and International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT).