

# Introduction to Ayurveda

## Introduction

This introduction is intended to offer you an approachable doorway into Ayurveda (aka “The Science of Life or Knowledge”), the traditional and ancient holistic science and wellness system originating from India that focuses on techniques and practices designed to create balance within our daily routines, our diet, and deepening our understanding of our unique mindbody-spirit constitution. Following you will find the core, foundational concepts which include the Five Great Elements, the Three Doshas, and the connection between the Doshas and the Four Seasons.

Ayurveda teaches that everything in nature including our bodies, minds, and emotions is made of five elemental energies: Ether, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth. These elements combine to form the three doshas, the primary mindbody patterns that shape how we feel, move, digest, and respond to life.

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### **The Five Great Elements (Pancha Mahabhutas)**

Ayurveda describes the elements as energetic principles, not literal substances. They help us understand qualities we experience in our bodies and in nature.

#### **1. Ether (Space)**

- Represents openness, spaciousness, and possibility
- Qualities: light, subtle, expansive
- In the body: cavities, joints, the space between cells
- In daily life: stillness, silence, creativity

#### **2. Air**

- Represents movement and flow
- Qualities: dry, cool, mobile, light
- In the body: breath, circulation, nerve impulses
- In daily life: change, inspiration, quick thinking

#### **3. Fire**

- Represents transformation and metabolism
- Qualities: hot, sharp, bright, penetrating

- In the body: digestion, metabolism, clarity of mind
- In daily life: motivation, drive, passion

#### **4. Water**

- Represents cohesion and nourishment
- Qualities: cool, soft, fluid, smooth
- In the body: blood, lymph, saliva, lubrication
- In daily life: emotional connection, empathy, adaptability

#### **5. Earth**

- Represents stability and structure
- Qualities: heavy, solid, grounded, steady
- In the body: bones, muscles, tissues
- In daily life: routine, reliability, patience

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### **The Three Doshas (Vata, Pitta, Kapha)**

The doshas are combinations of the five elements. They govern all biological and psychological processes. Every person has all three doshas interwoven into their unique constitution, but in different proportions.

#### **Vata Dosha (Air + Ether)**

Energy of movement

Most prominent in the Autumn and Early Winter Season

#### **Qualities:**

Light, dry, cool, mobile, quick

#### **Vata Dosha Governs:**

Breathing

Circulation

Nervous system

Creativity and imagination

#### **Balanced Vata Reflects:**

Clear, creative, and innovative thinking  
Flexibility  
Enthusiasm  
Good adaptability

**Imbalanced Vata Reflects:**

Anxiety, restlessness  
Dry skin, constipation  
Irregular appetite or sleep

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**Pitta Dosha (Fire + Water)**

Energy of transformation  
Most prominent during the summer and early autumn season

**Qualities:**

Hot, sharp, intense, oily

**Governs:**

Digestion and metabolism  
Focus and intellect  
Ambition and leadership

**Balanced Pitta Reflects:**

Strong digestion  
Confidence  
Sharp mind  
Healthy motivation

**Imbalanced Pitta Reflects:**

Irritability, frustration  
Heartburn, inflammation  
Perfectionism or overworking

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**Kapha Dosha (Earth + Water)**

Energy of stability and nourishment  
Most prominent during the Winter and Early Spring Season

**Qualities:**

Heavy, slow, cool, steady, smooth

**Governs:**

Immunity  
Lubrication of joints  
Emotional steadiness  
Physical strength

**Balanced Kapha Reflects:**

Calmness  
Compassion  
Endurance  
Stable energy

**Imbalanced Kapha Reflects:**

Lethargy, sluggishness  
Congestion  
Resistance to change

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**How the Elements and Doshas Work Together**

The five elements are the building blocks  
The doshas are the energetic patterns created by the five elements

Understanding the connection between the Pancha Mahabhutas and the Three Doshas helps practitioners notice why their energy changes with weather or seasons, or why certain foods feel grounding or stimulating, and why mood and energy shifts when our daily routines are balanced verses imbalanced.

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**Abhyanga: Ayurvedic Self-Massage (Feet-to-Head Sequence)**

A warm, nourishing Ayurvedic practice to soothe the nervous system, relieve muscle tension, support circulation, and overall to connect with your body. Following is your step-by-step guide:

**1. Prepare Your Space**

Choose a warm, quiet room.  
Lay down a towel or mat you don't mind getting oily.  
Keep warm water nearby to warm your hands if needed.  
Optional: soft music, dim lights, or a candle.

Intention Setting: Consider setting an intention when practicing Abhyanga. This can be a mindful approach to supporting your mental focus and energy flow.

## **2. Warm Your Oil**

Begin with a simple oil:

Sesame for warming and grounding – especially beneficial during the winter season

Coconut for cooling - beneficial during the hotter months / Summer season

Almond or jojoba for balanced nourishment

Warm 2–4 tablespoons by placing the bottle in a cup of hot water, or on stove top or massage oil warmer.

The oil should feel warm, not hot.

Warmth invites relaxation and deeper absorption.

## **3. Center Yourself**

Sit comfortably.

Take a few slow breaths.

Notice your body without judgment.

State your intention (e.g.) “I move slowly and with care.”

## **4. Begin at the Feet (Grounding the Practice)**

Feet:

Pour a small amount of warm oil into your hands.

Massage the soles with slow, steady pressure.

Circle the heels, arches, and balls of the feet.

Massage each toe individually.

Intention: Ground yourself; invite steadiness.

## **5. Lower Legs & Knees**

Ankles & Shins:

Use long, upward strokes from ankle to knee.

Circle around the ankle joint.

Calves:

Use broad, upward strokes.

Apply gentle pressure to release tension.

Knees:

Use circular motions around the knee joint.

Intention: Encourage upward movement of lymph and circulation.

## **6. Thighs & Hips**

Thighs:

Use long strokes from knee to hip.

Move slowly and with awareness.

Hips:

Use circular motions around the hip joints.

Stay within your comfort zone—skip any area that feels vulnerable.

Intention: Support grounding and stability in the lower body.

## **7. Abdomen & Lower Back**

Abdomen:

Use gentle clockwise circles (direction of digestion).

Keep pressure light and soothing.

Lower Back:

Reach around as comfortably as possible.

Use broad, upward strokes toward the ribs.

Intention: Support digestion and emotional ease.

## **8. Chest & Heart Space**

Move slowly and respectfully.

Use gentle, sweeping strokes across the chest.

Avoid deep pressure; keep the touch soft.

Move from the outer ribs inward toward the heart.

Intention: Invite openness without forcing it.

## **9. Arms & Hands**

Upper Arms:

Use long strokes from elbow toward shoulder.

Elbows & Wrists:

Circle around each joint.

Forearms:

Stroke upward toward the heart.

Hands:

Massage palms, backs of hands, and each finger.

Intention: Support the flow of energy toward the center of the body.

## **10. Neck, Shoulders & Scalp**

Neck:

Use upward strokes from collarbones toward jaw.

Keep pressure light.

Shoulders:

Use circular motions over the tops of the shoulders.

Scalp:

Massage with fingertips in small circles.

Intention: Release tension and invite clarity.

### **11. Rest & Absorb**

Let the oil soak in for 5–15 minutes.

You may sit, lie down, or wrap yourself in a towel or robe.

Intention: Allow the body to receive nourishment.

### **12. Rinse or Shower**

Take a warm shower.

Use minimal soap so the oil can continue to nourish the skin.

Pat dry gently and rub the remaining oil into your skin.

### **13. Close the Practice**

Sit quietly for a moment.

Notice any shifts in breath, mood, or sensation.

Offer gratitude to your body.

### **Trauma-Informed Notes:**

You may skip any area of the body.

You may keep clothing on and apply oil only to hands, feet, or scalp.

You may shorten the practice to 5 minutes.

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## **Kitchari**

Kitchari is simple. It will always be rice and split mung with ghee, salt, and spices (turmeric, ginger, fennel, coriander, cumin, cardamon). The spice blend is added to support digestion, and will vary to support your unique constitution and also spice blends vary depending on the season.

Kitchari is a soupy porridge. It is the food which offers nourishment to the physical body without compromising or straining your digestion. Kitchari is also helpful in balancing the Three Doshas (Vata, Pitta, and Kapha) and supports your Agni (your digestive fire).

Another way to look at it is to understand its inherent therapeutic value; it is comforting without being heavy, it is nourishing without being extractive, it is simple while being wholesome. Most importantly, it allows the body to adjust, reset and recover, naturally.

### **Kitchari is recommended:**

In times of recovery  
During and or after illness  
When one may be going through a highly stressful period  
Postpartum  
Post surgery  
In times of fasting or breaking a fast  
Panchakarma (classical Ayurvedic cleansing and rejuvenation therapy)  
When digestion is weakened or compromised  
For the elderly or for young children when digestion is weak, slow, or developing  
During seasonal transitions as a reset for your digestive system

### **The building blocks of kitchari**

Rice, mung beans, spices, ghee, and water are the necessary ingredients to make kitchari.

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## **Kitchari Recipe**

### **Simple Winter Kitchari with Vegetables**

Serves 4

#### **You'll need:**

1 tsp. cumin seeds  
1 tsp. coriander seeds  
1 tsp. brown mustard seeds  
3 tbsp. ghee  
½ cup basmati rice  
¼ cup split mung beans (if split mung is not available, use whole mung, soak overnight and cook well)  
1 strip of kombu, cut into small pieces  
4 -6 cups of water  
1/8 tsp. asafoetida (substitute fenugreek powder if asafoetida is not available)  
1 tsp. rock or mineral salt  
1 tbsp. fresh grated ginger root  
1 tsp. turmeric, fresh or powder  
½ tsp. cardamom  
3-4 cups freshly chopped veggies, such as carrots, squash, pumpkin or kale

#### **Here's how:**

In a pot or pressure cooker, simmer kombu, asafoetida and half the salt in 1 1/2 tbsp. ghee on medium-low heat until fragrant. Add rice and split mung and stir to cover with spice mixture.

Add water for desired thickness. If using a pot, bring to a simmer, cover and cook for 45 minutes or until grain and bean are soft. If you use a pressure cooker, cover, bring to pressure and cook for 18-20 minutes.

Meanwhile, heat the remaining ghee in a saucepan and add the remaining salt, ginger root, turmeric, cumin seeds, coriander seeds and mustard seeds. Simmer for 1-2 minutes until fragrant and then add the cardamom. Add the vegetables and stir to coat. Add water and cook veggies lightly until a knife goes in easily. Add to pressure cooker, stir and let sit at least 5 minutes to allow the tastes to become friends. Serve warm.

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## **Japa Yoga**

### **Brief Historical Overview**

Japa Yoga is an ancient, powerful meditative practice rooted in the Vedic tradition and carried forward through Yoga, Ayurveda, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism lineages. By repeating a mantra with intention and awareness, practitioners cultivate focus, emotional balance, decrease mental stress, and support spiritual insight. Its long history and crosscultural presence reflect its enduring effectiveness as a path toward inner stillness and awakening. As the popularity of yoga has spread globally, Japa became one of the most accessible and widely practiced forms of meditation. Its simplicity and repetition of a sound with breath and awareness, makes it accessible for practitioners of all levels and backgrounds. The word Japa means “to repeat softly,” reflecting the gentle, rhythmic nature of the practice.

### **Why Practice Japa Yoga?**

Japa is beginnerfriendly because the mantra gives the mind something steady to rest on.

Creating a calmer, more focused mind

Reduces stress and anxiety

Support for emotional balance

Improves concentration

Provides a sense of grounding and inner connection

An accessible entry point into meditation

### **How to Prepare:**

Choose a Mantra / Choose a sound or phrase that feels comfortable and meaningful (e.g.) Om, So Hum, or Om Shanti.

Practice Japa Yoga with Mala Beads (optional), a string of 108 beads used to count repetitions and support focus.

### **How to Practice:**

Find a comfortable seat. Sit upright but relaxed.  
Take a few slow breaths. Let your body settle.  
Begin repeating your mantra (aloud, whispered, silently in your mind)

Japa Yoga is a practice of returning, returning to your breath, your mantra, and cultivates an inner sense of steadiness. With time, the repetition can become a refuge, offering clarity, calm, and connection from within.

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## **Mala Beads**

### **What are Malas?**

Mala beads have been used by Yoga practitioners for thousands of years to help keep their minds focused during meditation. Malas were first created in India over 3000 years ago and have roots in Yoga, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The term ‘Mala’ is a Sanskrit word for “meditation garland.” Originally, mala beads were used for a specific style of meditation called Japa, which means, “to recite” also known as Japa Mala.

A mala is a string of 108 beads and Malas are used as a tool to help the mind focus on meditation or count mantras in sets of 108 repetitions. Mala beads that can be made of seeds, sandalwood or rosewood, or various gemstones. The 109th bead, is considered the Guru Bead which symbolizes completion and gratitude to all the spiritual teachers who have helped us on our path to enlightenment.

### **How are Malas used?**

Malas are traditionally held in the right hand, with the mala draped over the middle finger. The counter bead next to the guru represents the start of the meditation practice. Each counter bead is held between the thumb and middle finger. The thumb pulls the next counter bead over the middle finger after each repetition. The index finger does not touch the mala as it represents one’s ego (believed to be the greatest obstacle in attaining enlightenment). Once the last counter bead is reached, one can either end the meditation or continue by turning around and going in the other direction.

The use of mala beads is especially supportive when practicing the Sixth and Seventh Limbs of Yoga: Dharana (concentration) and Dhyana (meditation). Holding each bead between your fingers helps anchor your attention, bringing the mind into singlepointed focus (dharana) as you repeat your mantra. Each bead becomes a tactile reminder to remain mindful and free from distraction.

With consistent practice, your concentration may extend from one bead to two, then three, and eventually through the entire mala (108). This unbroken flow of awareness naturally leads into dhyana, a steady, continuous stream of meditation.

During Japa meditation, the mantra is repeated softly, traditionally 108 times, using the mala to keep track. A mantra is a sound or phrase used to support focus, and there are many meaningful mantras within the yoga tradition to explore.

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## **Mantra**

A mantra is a sound, word, or phrase repeated during meditation to focus the mind and steady attention. In the yoga tradition, mantras are considered vibrational tools, each one carries a specific quality or intention that supports concentration, calm, and inner clarity.

Some mantras are simple seed sounds like OM, while others are longer phrases that express devotion, peace, or self-awareness. What makes a mantra powerful is not its complexity, but the mindful repetition that helps guide the mind back to a single point of focus.

## **OM (AUM)**

Om (also known as AUM) is understood as the primordial sound, the vibration from which all creation emerges. Because the Five Great Elements (Ether, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth) are considered the building blocks of the physical world, OM is seen as the subtle vibration that gives rise to them.

### **In Essence:**

Om is understood as the seed vibration from which the Five Elements arise:

Ether - the space for sound

Air - the movement of vibration

Fire - the transformation of vibration into light

Water - the cohesion of energy

Earth - the solidification of form

Chanting OM is considered a way to harmonize the practitioner with the elemental forces that make up both the macro and microcosm.

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## **Lokāḥ Samastāḥ Sukhino Bhavantu**

Pronunciation: Lokah Sahmahstah Sookheeno Bhavuntoo

Translation: "May all beings everywhere be happy and free."

### **Meaning:**

This mantra is a universal prayer for peace, compassion, and collective wellbeing. It expresses the intention that:

All beings (not just humans)  
In all realms or places  
Experience happiness (sukha)  
And freedom (mukti)

It also carries the deeper yogic idea that our thoughts, words, and actions contribute to the happiness and freedom of others.

### **Why It's Chanted**

To cultivate compassion and lovingkindness  
To close a yoga or meditation practice  
To expand awareness beyond the self  
To align personal intention with collective wellbeing

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### **So Hum**

So Hum (sometimes written So Ham) is a Sanskrit mantra that translates to:

“I am That.”

It's a mantra of identity, presence, and connection—reminding us that our true nature is spacious, peaceful, and inseparable from the greater whole.

### **Syllable-by-Syllable Breakdown:**

#### **SO**

Represents the inhalation  
Symbolizes drawing in universal energy  
Points to the essence of pure awareness  
Invites spaciousness, expansion,