

Ayurveda: Yoga's Sister Science

Coffee culture

Ayurvedic doctor Dr Vijay Murthy asks the question: is coffee better before or after yoga?



The effects of coffee using ayurvedic principles are simple: it is sharp, heating, drying, and therefore increases Vata and Pitta; air and fire elements respectively, and reduces the sluggishness of earthy Kapha.

From a scientific standpoint, coffee is a stimulant straight after consumption but has a completely different effect if consumed habitually. In other words, there might be some health benefits for those who consume 3 to 4 cups of coffee a day over a long period of time, especially if you are not pregnant, not lactating, do not have high blood pressure, an established heart disease or over 65.

For years, even as an ayurvedic doctor, I have wondered why coffee is highly discouraged in yoga circles, especially in the West. But do not misunderstand me, I am by no means recommending coffee as an adjuvant to yoga or as an essential aspect of ayurvedic lifestyle if you are not a coffee drinker. However, if you love coffee, or if you have questions surrounding coffee and yoga or ayurveda, then I would like to offer some food for thought.

Tamasic & Satvic

Let me start with the popular assumption that any stimulant deters one from the practice of yoga and all such 'evils' are considered as 'tamasic' - whilst yoga is an attempt to bring harmony, and so is 'satvic'. For those not familiar with the terms, 'tamasic' and 'satvic', they refer metaphorically to the 'dark' and 'light' qualities. In practice, 'tamasic' or 'dark' qualities cause blockage physiologically, emotionally and spiritually. On the other hand, 'satvic' or 'light' qualities are desired qualities as they bring about balance at all levels.

So, foods, thoughts and actions are often seen through the lens of 'tamasic' and 'satvic' perspectives in eastern philosophies. Coffee's instant stimulation on the nervous system and the mind could be interpreted as 'tamasic' and such an opinion is unquestionably correct if we look at food and drinks from the prism of 'values attached to food'.

What I mean by 'values' is that in every culture several practices are based on 'beliefs' and 'not facts'. For example, my parents never eat garlic because it is tamasic and yet they drink coffee. The answer to such questions is simple: there is what is called 'cultural relativism', what is 'okay' in one culture may not be okay in another and we just live with it. In this sense, if within your yoga community, coffee is a taboo, you are more likely not to advocate coffee as that is part of your cultural identity. However, if you meet a coffee drinking yoga teacher who you would like to study with or you just happen to like coffee, you may want to understand the effects of coffee on health and its possible effect on your practice.

Ayurvedic types

From an ayurvedic perspective, if you have an airy constitution, usually termed *Vata* type, you will become more 'airy' in your mood and energy after drinking coffee. Either you will love this as 'you like feeling floaty and chatty' or you will hate it as 'you can become overly anxious and nervous'.

If you are the fiery person, *Pitta*, you might love coffee as it adds to your sharpness. However, excess coffee drinking can make you acidic, which is not so good especially if you are already fiery. It's a bit like adding insult to injury.

If you are the well rounded, well cushioned, laid back '*Kapha*' type, you might well need a cup of coffee to ignite you into physical and mental activity.

The immediate effect of coffee is not the same as its long-term effect. For example, you might feel peaceful and happy after eating a piece of cake. However, I am sure this will not be the long-term effect of habitual cake eating on an expanding waistline. Although coffee increases your *Vata* and *Pitta*, it may also reduce the 'toxic load' or *ama* in certain individuals, especially in bodily systems such as fat tissue, therefore reducing the risk of chronic diseases like diabetes. Once again, please do not take this as an endorsement for coffee drinking, more an interesting observation.

As an ayurvedic doctor, in situations such as this, I try to recollect what Charaka, one of the foremost scholars of ayurveda from 300 BC said: "Every substance has the potential to be either a medicine or a poison. The effect depends on the wisdom of the person using it".

The science

Today, science can help in developing such wisdom and therefore assist in making us better able to make an informed choice. Coffee has several chemical constituents, and the most commonly known ingredient is caffeine, which stimulates the nervous system, increases blood pressure, speeds up one's metabolism and activates the kidneys. Caffeine is rapidly absorbed and even reaches the brain and is metabolised in the liver.

If you are a nervous person by nature, coffee is not a good idea as it can make you nervous and anxious. If, on the other hand, you tend to be a bit slow and laid back, coffee might stimulate you to action. Certainly drinking coffee before yoga is not a good idea, although yoga itself may slow down the stimulating effect of the drink. The question is: would you rather use yoga as an antidote to coffee, or do you need coffee to get to the yoga studio? This is something you may want to contemplate and use your wisdom to make the best personal choice.

More than caffeine

Coffee is not all about caffeine. It has cafestol and kahweol, which have been shown to increase LDL the 'bad cholesterol'. However, both are removed in filtered coffee and are mostly present in boiled coffee, as in Turkish coffee. So, if you do not want coffee to increase your LDL cholesterol, filter coffee could be a much better choice.

And not everything about coffee is potentially bad. In fact, coffee is the richest source of two powerful antioxidants, chlorogenic acid and caffeic acid. You may already be aware that antioxidants are good for tissue repair and provide immunity against diseases. Coffee also has some essential micronutrients such as magnesium, potassium and niacin, not just as trace elements but in substantial amounts, which to a great extent could also contribute to health.

The most studied benefit of coffee consumption has been the

reduction in development of type 2 diabetes. Coffee consumption has also been shown to reduce the occurrence of Parkinson's disease particularly amongst men. Some studies have also demonstrated a relationship between a decreased risk of committing suicide amongst moderate coffee drinkers. There is also evidence that seems to suggest coffee consumption could help to reduce the risk of developing colon cancer. And coffee consumption seems to have a positive effect on liver enzymes. So, armed with more information and depending on the medical tendencies and the conditions that run in your family, you can choose to drink coffee or not drink coffee.

Bad news

Now, the bad news. Although it is not very well established through research, there are certain indications that coffee consumption may be harmful in people with high blood pressure and established heart diseases. Plus there is some evidence that excessive coffee consumption may not be good for those at risk of osteoporosis. Coffee is also known to disturb iron and zinc absorption.

Excessive coffee consumption has also been shown to delay conception so if you're trying for a baby, it is perhaps best to reduce or stop taking coffee. Research has certainly shown that excess coffee drinking is not good during pregnancy and lactation. It is not necessarily so good for older people either as it may interact with medications, especially as caffeine concentration in the blood amongst older people seems to be higher than in younger individuals. Above all, there is some evidence that genetic factors influence how one is affected by coffee, which is why it is a good idea to have some knowledge of family health issues.

In essence, coffee is neither a pre-requisite nor a contra-indication if you practice yoga or ayurveda. However, coffee, like any other food, has potential benefits and potential disadvantages for health. As my yoga teacher often said: 'Everything in moderation'.

What perhaps is common between yoga and coffee is that if you find the right teacher, practice or brand, you might become addicted. I will leave it up to you to ask the question 'is the addiction worth it for me?' ☸

