

Living According to the Seasons

During the recent hot summer months, I have been practising a couple of cooling breaths and have begun to realise the importance of the seasons in a pranayama practice.

Ayurveda, the ancient holistic healing system of India, identifies six seasons or ritus.

- **Hemantha** - a wet winter with snow and ice.
- **Sisira** - a dry winter with cold and windy weather.
- **Vasantha** - Spring
- **Grishma** - Summer
- **Varsha** - monsoon or rainy season
- **Sarath** - autumn or warm weather after the monsoon.

Nowadays due to climatic changes it is difficult to differentiate between our four seasons of summer, autumn, winter and spring and there can be marked changes in the weather from day to day, or even hour to hour! These constant changes are causing a huge strain on the body's immune system. It is necessary for it to adapt rapidly to changes in the weather, and when it cannot manage with the changes, ill health is caused. Because of all these changes in the climate, when making lifestyle choices in favour of the seasons it is important to take the whole season into account and then make slight daily changes in accordance with the temperature. The seasons will be looked at in greater detail later but first we will discuss a few breathing techniques which can be used in the hot and in the cold weather.

In the summer seasons we eat more cooling food due to the rise in temperature; the temperate of the individual is also likely to rise in this season. The cooling breath of **Shitali** is excellent to cool the mind and the body. This is the procedure of Shitali:

The tongue is rolled and breath inhaled through the tongue into the mouth. There is coolness on the tongue and the roof of the mouth and the cool air enters the nadis (channels of the body) and cools the body. Exhalation is done through the nostrils. As the inhaled air is not being cleansed by the nostrils before entering the lungs, it is important that this breathing technique is not practised in a polluted environment. Similarly it is advisable not to be practised in winter or cold weather as the nostrils are not involved in heating the air before it enters the lungs. As the breath is cooling to the body, it is beneficial in all pitta disorders, the dosha of fire and water. The cooling breath will balance out the heat, so conditions of hair loss, skin problems, hypertension and acidity can benefit from carrying out this technique. There are some contra-indications

to the breath; it is not to be done in conditions of asthma, bronchitis, low blood pressure and chronic constipation.

For those who cannot roll their tongues, there is another cooling breathing technique, called **Sitkari**. The procedure of Sitkari:

The mouth is kept open a little with the tongue touching the lower front teeth, and air inhaled through the mouth with a whistling sound. Exhalation is done through the nostrils. The benefits of this breathing technique are the same as Shitali.

Thus far we have been discussing pranayama as a breathing technique. The Sanskrit word is made up of two parts: prana and ayama. Prana is the life force and Ayama means expanding or lengthening. Patanjali, the founder of the eight-fold process (Ashtanga) of yoga, defines pranayama as the process by which the prana (life-force) is controlled. It is not just seen in terms of inhalation and exhalation, but the 'real' pranayama is in the retention of the breath. With the above two techniques of Shitali and Sitkari; after the breath is inhaled there is retention of the breath before it is exhaled. Similarly after the air has been exhaled there is a restraint of the breath before the next inhalation.

So to summarise so far, during the summer season the two cooling breaths can be done to maintain the body temperature in a cooler state. The yoga routine the individual follows should also be less vigorous in the summer as body strength is lost during the hot weather.

The individual gains strength in the autumn which carries into the winter. Agni (digestive fire) is stronger in the winter months and digestion will be better so less ama (undigested accumulated waste) in the body. The yoga practice of the individual can be more vigorous and a lot of sun salutations performed to keep away any winter blues. There are also two pranayama techniques which are more beneficial when done in the winter.

The first is **Suryabheda**. The procedure for this breathing technique is:

The left nostril relates to the moon, and the right to the sun. In this technique the inhalation is always via the right nostril and hence the name surya (sun) bheda. Breath is inhaled through the right nostril, retained and then exhaled through the left nostril. This technique is more beneficial in the winter as it produces heat in the body. This pranayama is good in vata disorders, where the dosha consisting of air and space is increased. It increases the agni (digestive fire) of the individual and so helps in digestion. The contra-indications of this breathing technique are heart disease, hypertension or epilepsy.

There is also another pranayama which is useful in the winter months as it is also warming to the body. This is **Ujjayi** pranayama. The procedure for Ujjayi is:

Breath is inhaled through both nostrils and taken into the throat, with a slight sound being made. The breath is retained for as long as possible and then exhaled through the left nostril. This pranayama is good for kapha disorders, in which the dosha of earth and water has been increased. Therefore the breath is good in respiratory problems such as

bronchitis and asthma. It should be done without retention when the individual is suffering from high blood pressure or heart disease.

We have concentrated on the breathing techniques to be done during the hot and cold weather, but will now look at the six seasons in more detail and other ways in which we can change our lifestyle in accordance with the seasons.

Hemantha: As was previously noted this is a wet winter with snow and ice, and the best time to do the two heating breathing techniques discussed. The agni (digestive fire) of the person is high and enough has to be eaten to ensure that the agni acts on the food and does not destroy the dhatus (body components). It is beneficial to do Abhyanga, a daily oil application, on the whole body. The individual should keep warm and try to get as much sunlight as possible. Food taken should be more of the sweet, sour and salty tastes.

Sisira: This dry winter with cold and windy weather has the same lifestyle choices as hemantha but more intense as the weather is even colder.

Vasantha: In the Spring season the weather is warming up. This means the kapha (earth and water dosha) which was literally frozen during the winter, melts and causes kapha imbalances and disorders such as asthma and allergies. It is advisable to do treatments for kapha at the change of this season, such as vamana (emesis) and nasya (medicated nasal drops). Udwartana (powder massage) is also carried out and more exercise is done. Food taken should be light and dry; heavy, sour and sweet food should be avoided.

Grishma: In this summer season the two cooling breaths discussed should be done. Food taken should be sweet, light, cooling and unctuous in nature; sour, salty and pungent tastes should be avoided. Exercise and going out in the sun should be avoided as they weaken the body strength even more, and no oil massages should be done.

Varsha: In the monsoon all the three doshas get vitiated, so the food taken should be agni strengthening.

Sarath: In autumn the weather heats up again so pitta can become out of balance. The cooling breaths can be done again. Food taken should be bitter, sweet, astringent and light.

As can be seen there are certain lifestyle changes which can be done in accordance with the seasons especially as regards to food. To summarise then, by doing certain pranayama and slight seasonal changes we can regulate our body to the external temperature that it is being exposed to and therefore eliminate dosha imbalances and therefore ill-health.

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