

Yoga guru Tara Stiles' new approach to wellness is grounded in the ancient wisdom of Ayurveda. Here's how to apply its teachings to find balance in your life.

words / RACHEL B. LEVIN

Back in 2015, yoga maven and wellness expert Tara Stiles found herself living a painful paradox. She was traveling the world teaching her signature style of yoga for stress relief and healing, yet her own mind-body wellbeing was faltering.

Stiles' straightforward and accessible approach to yoga—which leaves out elements that can alienate some newcomers, including Sanskrit names for poses and explicit spiritual teachings—had caught on, big time. She and her husband, Mike Taylor, had opened their first commercial studio space, called Strala Yoga, in New York City in 2010, attracting a wide following in person and on social media (including wellness luminaries like Deepak Chopra and Jane Fonda).

Stiles was delighted by the doors that opened for her to expand Strala into a global collection of studios. But a nonstop 2013/14 travel and event schedule, combined with demanding social media obligations, left her frazzled, depleted, and depressed. “My inside system was running a mile a minute,” she says.

The journey that the former dancer and model took to recharge herself after hitting a breaking point in 2015 laid the groundwork for her latest book, *Clean Mind, Clean Body: A 28-Day Plan for Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Self-Care*. The four-stage detox program is predicated on East Asian approaches to wellbeing, particularly Ayurveda. This ancient Indian system of natural medicine emphasizes the interconnectedness of the mind, body, and spirit in overall health.

Ayurveda is one of the tools that helped Stiles regain her equilibrium as she followed its central principles of “simplifying and slowing down,” she says, in the way we eat, live, and move. “Once I could relate it back to my own life, then everything started to make sense.”

BEGIN WITH YOUR BELLY

Good digestion is the foundation of mind-body wellbeing, according to Ayurveda. When your “digestive fire,” or *agni*, is in balance, you can not only digest food properly, but also enjoy a clear mind.

These teachings emerged thousands of years before Western scientists discovered the gut-brain axis (a network that acts as a switchboard between the two), yet they square with our current understanding of the reciprocal relationship between digestion and our physical and mental health. >>

EASY DOES IT

PHOTO: LIEN FAUCET

Your state of mind can have an immediate impact on digestion—one that may stop you up or send you running to the toilet. “If your mind is really stressed, it’s telling your body, ‘Something’s wrong. You need to hold on to everything or you need to get rid of everything,’” says Stiles.

Over time, ongoing stress and depression can alter the composition of bacteria in our gastrointestinal tract, setting the stage for everything from irritable bowel syndrome to inflammatory diseases. Conversely, because our guts produce approximately 90 percent of our bodies’ serotonin—a hormone also found in the brain that helps regulate our moods and emotions—digestive troubles can set off anxiety and depression.

Ayurveda recognizes that because we all possess different mind-body types (*doshas*), there is not one standard diet or lifestyle that best supports healthy digestion. At the same time, everyone can follow certain guidelines to keep the process running smoothly.

FOLLOW NATURE’S LEAD

Ayurveda’s central dietary principle helps connect us to the cycles of nature: “Eat what’s fresh in season,” says Stiles. “Look around at what’s available to you in the local farmers markets.”

Fresh-picked produce is thought to be rich in *prana*, or “life force.” Eating seasonally also helps align *agni* by balancing the hot and cold states our bodies experience as the weather fluctuates. Think cooling foods like cucumbers and melon in the summer and warming ones like roasted root vegetables in the winter.

Eating at the right times of day can be just as important as eating in tune with the seasons. While in contemporary American culture, dinner is often the day’s largest meal, Ayurveda recommends eating your biggest meal in the middle of the day—when your *agni* is at its strongest—and following it with a light dinner. This meal pattern allows your digestive system to take a rest overnight, and studies suggest it may benefit your metabolism and your waistline.

A native of rural Illinois, Stiles notes that several family members who work on a farm started by her great-grandfather eat this way because it fits the rhythms of farm life. When the sun is highest and hottest, they break for a large midday meal and rest—similar to the siestas that are taken in Mediterranean cultures like Spain. “That’s Ayurveda,” says Stiles.

You may not be able to sneak in a siesta during your workday, but Stiles advises at least stepping away from your desk to let your mind and body relax while you eat.

PAUSE AND REFRESH

Ayurveda teaches that we need ample time to digest not just our food but our life experiences. Taking on too many activities and commitments without allowing ourselves to fully process and assimilate them can tax our mind-body balance.

When Stiles internalized this wisdom, she made changes to her busy travel schedule that rekindled her wellbeing. “I started to figure out how to stay in a city longer and have more meaningful interactions and events instead of running from one thing to the next,” she says. “I started slowing myself down on the inside.” >>



PHOTO | JES LOK

TEAM TUMMY

These herbs and supplements help digestion hum along naturally.

- Ginger and turmeric—both Ayurvedic staples—ease digestion and support gastrointestinal health.
- Peppermint and chamomile soothe digestive upsets.
- Garlic and rosemary promote a healthy gut microbiome.
- Probiotics and psyllium fiber help keep you regular.



JUST BREATHE

When you're stressed, your body's fight-or-flight response can interfere with digestion. Taking slow, deep breaths mitigates this by activating your relaxation response.

Stiles explains that any practice that helps you cultivate self-awareness—whether it's meditation or walking in nature—can allow you to enter a “rest-and-digest space,” where you can be in “repair mode.” That is, as long as you don't apply the same ambition to your “rest” as you do to whatever it is you're resting from.

Stiles points out that as the pursuit of wellness has become ever-trendier, it threatens to undermine the very mind-body connection we seek. Beginning around 2016, she began noticing that “people would come into our studio to a class, and then they would go somewhere and get a green juice and go somewhere and get a massage—and then be stressed out in the middle of the whole thing,” she says.

Though she acknowledges that an abundance of wellness activities can be wonderful, Stiles believes the key to maintaining internal harmony is the quality, not quantity, of our wellness endeavors. “Maybe just do one thing a day instead of 25,” she says.

MOVE IN GENTLE WAYS

Ayurveda considers regular exercise to be vital for overall wellness. It fires up *agni*, thereby aiding digestion, and—as modern studies have confirmed—also combats stress, boosts mood, and sharpens mental clarity.

But the attitude of “no pain, no gain” has no place in Ayurveda. Exerting ourselves too much can lead to imbalance that drains, rather than fortifies, our energy. “Take the pressure off of your movement being goal-oriented,” says Stiles. “Move in a way that is whole-self connected.”

Practices like tai chi and yoga can certainly fit the bill. But you don't have to be plugged into a class for movement to lift your spirits. Stiles notes that even daily activities like carrying groceries and sweeping the floor can be beneficial if we execute them mindfully. “Treat all of your movements all day long as self-care,” she says.

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Even just taking five minutes away from your work desk to move and breathe deeply can recalibrate your mindset. For example, Stiles' “5-Minute Refresh” practice of side bends, high lunges, and twists is an office-friendly way to unblock tension.

DARE TO UNPLUG

In March, Stiles moved with her husband and their toddler Daisy from New York to Southern Illinois to be closer to Stiles' extended family. Relocating to a rural area from the big city hasn't guaranteed a slower pace. “Everything being on the computer right now [due to the COVID-19 pandemic], it feels like as busy as I want to be, I can be,” she says.

She acknowledges that given our hyperconnected lives, deliberately choosing to slow down can be uncomfortable for many of us. We fear that we'll miss out or lose our momentum. But for Stiles, dialing things back “doesn't mean that you're giving up or you're quitting your life.”

On the contrary: “You actually get more done,” she says. “You become more useful to yourself, your body works better, [and] you're more productive—because you're using your whole self.” @

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