

The Healing Powers of Yoga and Ayurveda

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On the last day of the last month last year I broke a bone for the first time in my life. It was a real shock to my system and real life learning for my yoga practice...

The incident:

As I had not broken any bones growing up, I assumed it would not happen to me. At this stage in my life, bone health issues were more about ensuring I did not have osteopenia. However, on December 31, 2012, as I was preparing to celebrate New Year's eve, I broke my right fibula. I was on holiday in Sri Lanka - at my best friend's beach house in a breathtakingly beautiful spot. We had arrived the night before and I'd had a super sleep and woke up early as I need to get my daughter some medication. Still half-asleep, I started down a fairly steep and dewy slope toward the kitchen. As if part of a dream, my feet slipped from under me and next thing I was on the wet grass with a severe pain in my right ankle. I knew it was not good but I thought it was just a bad sprain. I regained a bit of composure and hobbled to the kitchen to pick up the medication and then back to our room. For the rest of the day, I kept ice packs on my ankle and assumed that the swelling would subside – and my holiday would resume.

A visit to the village Ayurvedic bone specialist:

Well, the next day the swelling was worse and it was very painful. As a life-long migraine sufferer, I have a high pain threshold and thought that it could not be broken. So I kept icing and avoid putting weight on that foot. Being on holiday, I was not going to spend my day at the local hospital having an x-ray; instead, I went to the local Ayurvedic doctor – whom I was told was excellent and had learnt her trade from her father. We caught a tuk tuk and located the doctor in a small village in the middle of the jungle. The doctor massaged my leg with a special bone oil, applied warm heat to it in the form of a “bolus” filled with herbs and then applied a thick herbal paste and bandaged my leg and ankle (this treatment is called Pindswed in Ayurvedic medicine). I was instructed to return the next day.

The prognosis:

A childhood friend who arrived at the beach house that day happened to be an orthopaedic surgeon practicing in Manhattan. He palpated my leg and suggested that I have an x-ray when we returned to Colombo. He did not say it but I could tell he thought it was broken. I could

not face the local A&E and instead went back to the Ayurvedic doctor, who gave me another treatment and provided me with oil and herbs to continue treating my ankle.

A few days later, we returned to Colombo and went directly to one of the larger hospitals for an x-ray, which confirmed that my fibula was fractured. Luckily, my orthopaedic doctor friend had also returned to Colombo and was able to fit me with a removable “air” cast instead of the plaster cast that the hospital would have fitted, which would have severely delayed my return to London. The other benefit of my air cast was that I was able to continue massaging my leg with the special oil and applying my warm herb boluses.

Returning to London and the healing process:

In London, I was fortunate to see a leading foot and ankle specialist. He was impressed with how the Ayurvedic treatments had significantly reduced the inflammation and as a result retained a substantial degree of rotation in the joint – and his recommendation was not to perform surgery. Given the mobility, he also recommended that I started physiotherapy the following week, which I did in addition to my yoga practice.

For the following three months, I continued with daily Ayurvedic oil and herbal ankle treatments and also orally took Ayurvedic herbs and slowly and carefully re-established my yoga practice with the help of my senior Iyengar yoga teachers. It is amazing what one can do with a cast: head stand, hand stand, standing postures, back bends... The challenge was to understand how much I could do and when to push and when to rest. The cast was an extra weight that my body had to adjust to and I had to be careful not to overdo and inadvertently strain another part of my body.

I had resumed my teaching one week after returning to London. At times I felt like an “old ballet dame” with my walking stick and my classes were full of jokes about my broken leg and stick.

Nine months following my fracture, I spent the month of October in Puna, India at the Ramamani Iyengar Yoga Institute studying with the Iyengar family. I was able to withstand the rigor of the advanced classes although at times there was still pain and stiffness in my leg and ankle - especially after a two hour class with Geetaji that focused on the “hinges of the foot” (the lower leg and ankle).

Harshini has been practicing Iyengar yoga for over fifteen years and has been teaching since 2006.