

Shirodhara: A Proper Dhara

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"Thou anointist my head with oil... my cup runneth over...."

Ayurveda is a comprehensive system of health care and maintenance. The Ayurvedic approach is not limited to any particular diet, herbal formulation, or treatment. An appropriate health regime is determined for each individual depending on one's inherent humoral balance, as well as age, mental capacity, digestive power, compatibility with food, elimination habits, and many other considerations. Treatment in Ayurveda may involve a change of diet, change of lifestyle and habits, herbal regime, internal cleansing, and elimination of accumulated humoral waste.

There is a well-defined procedure to follow in the Ayurvedic cleansing therapy known as *Pancha Karma*. Strictly speaking *Pancha Karma* means "Five Cleansings" (decoction enema, purging through the lower channel, induced vomiting, nasal cleansing, and blood-letting) but the term is currently used to indicate any one of these five cleansings. The cleansings are clinical procedures and none are initiated without first implementing a lengthy preparation conceived to arouse, loosen, and mobilize toxins which are enmeshed with the tissues and their fluids. The toxicity is not limited only to the physical tissues but also permeates the mind as well and are associated with unhealthy habits and lifestyle. The process of preparing the patient for elimination is called *Purva Karma*.

Purva Karma generally involves the application of heat and oil, or fomentation (*swedana*) and oleation (*snehana*), both internally and externally, in an effort to arouse the toxins and render the tissues slippery. Certain decoctions are also offered for this purpose. This process of fomentation and oleation is likely to last a week or so before any elimination takes place. There are several treatments in particular associated with the *Purva Karma* process which stand on their own as rejuvenation treatments, and are not necessarily administered solely for the purpose of elimination preparation: *Abhyanga* (massage with oil), *shirodhara* (oil applied to the brow) and *kaya seka* (or *Pizhichil*, full body oiling).

Unlike most aspects of Ayurveda there are really no references in the classical scriptures (*samhitas*) to the actual hands-on procedures involved in these treatments. This important part of Ayurvedic clinical therapy has been kept alive in the public domain mainly within the clinics and nursing homes of Kerala State in south India, where they have been administered for generations by practitioners versed in the lore. Kerala, sequestered from the rest of India by the Nilgiri Hills and the sea, has been the repository of this aspect of Ayurvedic practice. It is the seat not only of India's largest and most respected Ayurvedic treatment facility at Kottakkal, but also many smaller family-operated treatment centers all over the state from Trivandaram to Kasaragod. The Kerala-style treatments are known to set the

standard in India for traditional Ayurveda. Among Ayurvedic practitioners all over India Kerala's preeminence in the realm of traditional bodywork treatments is acknowledged.

Ayurvedic oleation treatments are quite specialized and elaborate. Some of these techniques are being integrated into spa and studio treatments in America - for stress reduction, self-awareness, and a taste of the exotic. Foremost of these would be *shirodhara* (recently featured on the covers of *Massage and Bodywork*, a professional magazine, and *Hinduism Today*). Shirodhara seems to have captured the American imagination, but unfortunately its application or effects are not adequately appreciated or respected, as it is being modified for the sake of simplicity and marketability. It is treated as a commercible service instead of a healing modality in part of a comprehensive program.

In this treatment a continuous stream of oil is applied in wavelike motion to the forehead using a pot suspended directly above the head. The entire cranium is thus saturated with oil. The client is mollified by the swaying motion of the oil stream which through its sensation induces a meditative experience. The medicinal oil, prepared with nutritive and tonic herbs, is also absorbed through the hair follicles into the tissues surrounding the brain, affecting the central nervous system. It effectively alleviates stress which is the causative factor in many serious diseases.

Shirodhara is both profound and subtle. In the Ayurvedic clinics of South India this treatment is only offered daily in a series lasting at least a week, and possibly up to 21 days or more. It is only one therapeutic component of an over-all treatment plan that includes diet, herbal preparations, and prolonged relaxation. Clients are not encouraged to engage in any activity that stimulates thought. If one reads it is recommended that the material be conducive to spiritual thought. No sexual activity or intense physical activity is advised.

It is a stated principle (in the *Chikitsa Sangraham*, a manual published by the Kottakkal foundation) that the flow of oil should be constant. The hole in the bottom of the pot should be the size of the patient's little finger. The pressure of the flow is attenuated by the use of a "wick" (cotton cord) which is knotted and run through the hole in the oil pot. It can be adjusted to increase or decrease the volume of the flow of oil accordingly. The wick remains just above the client's brow, thus reducing the pressure and concentration of the oil stream. The flow of oil must not only be constant (dripping means you have botched the effect), but it is kept moving from side to side as low as the eyebrows and as high as the hairline.

In Kerala this treatment is generally performed by two or three attendants. There is an attendant to guide the pot, keeping the stream of oil moving "to and fro, left and right slowly," and an attendant to keep the pot continuously filled. It is possible with considerable practice for one person to fill the pot

and maintain the proper movement at the same time. It is very clearly stated in the *Chikitsa Samgraham*, however, that there is always a therapist on hand, preferably standing or "seated on a stool" next to the table where he or she can be seen by the one who's receiving the treatment for the sake of assurance and security. The text also reads: that the therapist who handles the suspended Dhara vessel "should be vigilant and pay concentrated attention." Dhara should never be performed without a qualified attendant on hand at all times.

I might add here that although there is no actual physical contact between the therapist and the subject, there is a high level of interaction taking place between them, as it is the therapist who actually consciously directs the flow coming into contact with the subject's brow. If the therapist is concentrated then that will be communicated to the client as an effect of the treatment. The human element is fundamental. It does not constitute a proper treatment to simply fill a pot with oil, open a valve, and train a stream of oil to a single point on a person's head. That would be analogous to expecting a massage treatment and then being placed in a whirlpool or a vibrating chair.

The effect of shirodhara is subjective. This treatment in particular represents an interface between the traditions of Yoga and Ayurveda. It creates a meditative sense of awareness as it is focusing and isolating. *Dhara*, which means "constant flow," is contained in the word *dharana* one of the seven stages of yoga realization, generally translated as "concentration." The brow, of course, is that part of the external anatomy associated with the fundamental endocrine glands (pineal, pituitary, hypothalamus) which organize and regulate all hormonal secretions. Hormonal secretions are responsible not only for the autonomic responses which control digestion, breath, elimination, etc., but also our moods and emotional state. Not unlike the desired goal of many styles of Western bodywork, *shirodhara* is meant to establish a state of parasympathetic repose, an ego-less state, during which the primal intelligence of our body can reorganize its constituents in a manner which leads to healing and survival, their inherent purpose. For this reason *shirodhara* can be applied in Ayurvedic healing for conditions as seemingly unrelated as skin rashes, Tourette's, insomnia, and diabetes.

In addition to the subjective effects the blend of oils used in *shirodhara* are conceived to impart their healing qualities as the oil is absorbed through the hair follicles and into the soft tissue of the brain. For this reason in the Kerala tradition the client is required to leave their hair unwashed for the duration of the entire series of treatments. The herbal medicinal oils of Ayurveda are prepared according to formulations articulated in the classical treatises. These formulations vary depending on the intent of the treatment as well as the needs and condition of the client. Unlike most massage and essential oils used by therapists in America, these medicinal oils are scrupulously prepared in large vats over a cooking fire for a period of several days. The oils are first combined with a herbal decoction and then gently simmered until the water is entirely removed, leaving only the herbal ingredients integrated into the oil

base. This cooking process, like a well-prepared meal, renders the finished oil more assimilable through the skin than ordinary raw oils. The aromas of Ayurvedic herbal oils are more like the smell of good food from the oven than the essences of plants and blossoms. Typical formulations for *shirodhara* might contain various kinds of plant oils (sesame, coconut, castor, etc) animal products (ghee, milk, etc), herbs (water hyssop, calamus root, valerian, winter cherry, passion flower, sandalwood, bringaraj), and spices (cardamom, ginger, etc).

Although *shirodhara* is being offered as a half-hour spa treatment in America nowadays, traditionally its healing effects are considered too subtle for one single application. As mentioned the treatments must be offered continuously on a routine basis for at least a week. During that time the client is housed and nourished in a therapeutic environment which calls for routine, proper diet, rest, and respite from extremes of all kinds. Because of the client's sensitivity during and after the treatment, additional days of recovery are required to prepare the client for re-entry into the pace of day-to-day life. During these additional days oil is still applied daily to the crown of the head with the use of a saturated cloth (*picchu*).

As Ayurvedic techniques are introduced into American culture, practitioners as well as consumers will be tempted to experiment with the tradition, isolating certain elements of the comprehensive treatment protocols to satisfy their curiosity and to present an easily marketable service. The risk in this inevitable kind of fragmentation is that Ayurveda will suffer in its effectiveness as a healing science and its credibility will be tarnished. The elaborate and long-term nature of Ayurvedic bodywork treatments makes them easy targets for American efficiency, simplification, and marketability. However, since the root cause for many disorders is the frantic pace at which we live, over-stimulation, busy-ness, taking life at a breakneck speed, seeking more and more distraction, diversion, and entertainment to absorb our senses, then it will not serve us in the long run to streamline the very styles of therapy conceived to heal us of these excesses. They require a very precious commodity - time. Those who will ultimately avail themselves of Ayurvedic treatments need to be familiar with the principles and application of the true science and accept nothing less in their quest for enduring health.