

Ayurvedic Massage: An ancient method of yogic healing with cutting edge application ?

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In these difficult and changing economic times it can be very profitable to branch out into a medicine that is unique , ancient and very much alive today . Ayurvedic medicine is thousands of years old (2500 – 4000 B.C.) and is still one of the largest practiced today Historians have traced its influences on Greek, Persian , Indonesian and Chinese medicine. But why has it endured so long and what is its relevance ?

Let us look at the meaning of Ayurvedic medicine and its goals to understand its relevance and effects on Western massage. Ayurveda literally means the science of life and encompasses the whole human existence of : mind, body and spirit. Ayurvedic massage is just one branch and can be practiced on its own but can be more powerful in conjunction with the other branches of: Yoga, herbology and diet. When we look at its branches and meaning we can already deduce that Ayurveda is to be practiced by physician and patient alike and as a way or to good health , both physical and spiritual. Ancient texts recommend daily baths, self-massage, vegetarian diets with lots of liquids and meditation. That sounds very much like the Tao of Chinese medicine and like all good medical practices , the patient is encouraged to take responsibility for his health. The practitioner will emphasize that Ayurvedic medicine creates physical detoxification, longevity and spiritual consciousness. All of these result in balance and harmony within and without the human being. Remember how at school we massage therapists learned about homeostasis ? The difference is that we can actually do something about it and not just study it. So what role does Ayurvedic massage play in achieving balance and harmony while following the principles of the science of life?

Ayurvedic massage has a special purpose in creating from infancy onwards , the individual's consciousness and intellect . In a way it's like switching on a light in the child . In its infancy the human being is consumed by physical desires and survival but the awakening of a spirit that is creative and tied to the eternal leads to the development of a fully mature adult . Experts refer to this spiritual consciousness or bliss as subtle energies manifested in four bodies that are created from it. These bodies are the intellect or understanding , emotions and desire , ego and willpower . But how is this achieved through touch?

Veterans of the massage business will remember how almost twenty years ago Dr. Tiffany Fields (see The Touch Research Institute) researched the effects of infant/pediatric massage on early child development. The protocols for this type of massage has its roots in Ayurvedic massage introduced to this country by Vimala Schneider in the 1970s (“The Traditional Art of Indian Baby Massage “ – Knopf, 1976). Whereas from a Western perspective , infant pediatric massage increases growth hormone output , neurological development , musculoskeletal development and overall a physically healthy and normal baby , Ayurvedic massage also claims that the seeds of rational thinking or intellect ,emotions, memories and willpower are implanted in the

infant . This is achieved through tapping into the subtle energy of Prana (universal life energy or subtle energy) which flows along the energy pathways known as Nadis (meridians or vessels or subtle nerve flow). The Ayurvedic practitioner not only addresses all the physiological systems but works on acupressure points (marmas) , nadis and chakras (wheels of energy or subtle energy centers) . It is when working with these subtle energies that the mind of the patient is able to influence the body in a most beneficial manner. It does so through the awakening and channeling of prana. Ayurvedic massage thus brings mind, body and spirit together in meaningful harmony. Therefore Western practitioners should seriously consider branching out also into infant/pediatric massage Yet how is this link between mind, body and spirit to be further understood as unique in medicine ?

A principal goal in Ayurvedic medicine and massage is longevity . But longevity is partially achieved by physical, emotional and spiritual purification. Nowhere in other ancient and enduring medical philosophies is there such an emphasis on purification (panchakarma) as in Ayurveda. The goal is first detoxification of the emotions and spirit which are stagnated and burdened with negative thinking from the heart. This is achieved through the intent of the therapist .

The intent is to create tranquility within patients through activity from the outside as performed by the Ayurvedic therapist. Only when the body is in parasympathetic state does cellular repair occur. We are reminded of the effects of Ayurvedic massage on the growth hormones in infants. In adults they repair our cells ensuring rejuvenation. This is similar to the effects of Swedish massage which in a small measure also help detoxification but it is the intent of the Ayurvedic therapist that creates another major difference. The Ayurvedic therapist works from the inner consciousness or heart. Only when inner calmness has been attained by the therapist can the heart take over the mind in directing the therapy. The heart is the source of both feelings and thoughts . The mind in the therapist is responding to the feelings of the heart which means that there is no conscious thought devoted to “fixing” the patient as in Western medical massage . The purely rational mind can interfere with the heart which is grounded in peace . When the therapist is thus grounded we call this state of being in the West as “ being in the zone”. But surprisingly, there is a correspondent inner feeling of peace in the patient so that healing takes place from within ! Another major difference between Western medical massage and Ayurvedic massage is that the therapist does not intend to heal the pain through greater pressure but that the patient becomes cocooned in an aura of tranquility so that he becomes more self-aware and ultimately heal themselves. The heart which is both the source of feelings and consciousness thus infuses every cell with tranquility . This sounds all very spiritual and it looks like the Western massage student might have to study yoga first before first touching the client in Ayurvedic massage, but this is not necessarily the case. While it helps to practice some form of meditation before treating patients there are also methods of treatment to achieve this inner peace in the patient and therapist by remaining within the parameters of the “ Science of life” .

The very first approach is to select the right essential oils and carrier massage oils to purify the mind, body and spirit. The selection is based on a fusion of the constitutional

type of patient (the dosha) and the intent of the therapist. Doshas are metabolic and psychological generalizations into which each patient more or less fits. They are similar to the five elements in Chinese medicine. If the patient is heavy ,cold , tending towards obesity and slow in movement and thought then he belongs to the Kapha type . Chances are that he most likely would like to be stimulated . You would use essential oils like ginger, Frankincense ,black pepper and clove bud to heat and energize. Kapha types tend to be mucousy and have sinus infections . Such oils will clear the lungs of any infections and open the lung passages as well. In contrast, the Vata type is more energetic , of light build and thin and very active in mind and body . Vata types tend to worry unlike the Kapha type and have digestive problems. The therapist will choose chamomile, fennel, basil and marjoram. All of these are examples of oils that calm the nerves, muscles and digestive system. But why would you choose oils first before massage or physical treatment?

The answer lies again in the intent of the therapist. Once the constitutional type has been ascertained and classified , the patient is in a manner of speaking “opened up “ and prepared for other treatments to achieve the dominance of a tranquil heart over the mind In the West we speak of the parasympathetic system achieving dominance over the sympathetic system. The application of oils is often reverently spoken of in Ayurvedic medicine as “sanctifying” and “anointing” and it reminds the alert student of ancient biblical practices. Frankincense and myrrh are popular essential oils that awaken and purify the lungs and viscera while heightening the consciousness of the patient for meditative purposes. On a purely physical level the oils are applied to the marmas and nadis individually to get more movement of stagnant or deficient prana

Once the therapist has achieved the anointing , then the choice of massage stroke according to constitutional type is very important . Ayurvedic massage has different strokes that purely energise, calm the spirit and diffuse chronic pain. Yet all the time the goal remains one of re-establishing or fortifying the link between mind, body and spirit. The result is that the patient becomes the healer and not vice versa. Ultimately , all the multiple applications of Ayurvedic branches enable the massage therapist to work smarter and not harder !

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