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A conceptual study on mode of action of *Abhyanga*

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ABSTRACT

Ayurveda literally means 'science of life'. According to Ayurveda the term health does not stand only for the freedom from diseases but it is called as healthy only when a person's mind, sense organs and the soul are in a perfect state of equilibrium to endow happiness and the body is free from diseases. So it is clear that maintaining a good health was for the longevity of life. Maharshi Charaka has used the term '*Samhanana*' to denote the compactness of body. A compact body is characterized by the symmetrical and well divided bones, well-knit joints and well bound muscles and blood. An individual having a compact body is very strong, otherwise he is weak. Thus a patient should be examined with reference to his *Samhanana* or compactness of the body. This is the main reason for why Ayurveda has given paramount importance on maintaining a positive health, either by following strict routine daily life and doing particular things or by getting some therapeutic measures, like *Rasayana*, *Panchakarma* etc. *Abhyanga* is the therapeutic intervention of *Panchakarma* in which the body is treated with simple or medicated oil on particular body part according to need. Whenever there is a discomfort or uneasiness over the body we unknowingly try to soothe it through massage.

Key words: Ayurveda, *Abhyanga*, *Dinacharya*, *Samhanana*, *Panchakarma*.

INTRODUCTION

It's always been mandatory for a physician to have knowledge about the whole body, otherwise his knowledge will be considered as incomplete. In olden days *Abhyanga* was one among the daily routine. It is mainly included in the *Dinacharya* because of its great importance on body like improving bodily growth and relieving stress etc. It has also got

paramount importance among the *Panchakarma* as a subtype of *Bahya Snehana* and *Poorvakarma* for all the major *Panchakarma* therapeutic procedures. It has many qualities for what hardly there may be a few classical texts of Indian origin that have not mentioned about its practice and qualities. In both therapeutic as well as preventive purpose it has been used with great results. But with the time changing fast, *Abhyanga* has got the worldwide popularity as Ayurvedic massage. In the present era life is running very fast and to cope up with its ups and downs man has to run faster than his capacity. At present we are reaching a point where we are becoming increasingly more conscious of our bodies and the need to keep them in the best possible condition. Staying in the best condition reflects in all our life's activities.

Daily balancing of our physical state provides not only maximum performance also a richer motional life. All these stress and tension of modern people attract them towards the easily accessible massage therapy

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centers for a time being relief. Around 250 types of massage therapies are available all over the world. Ayurveda has its own stand on the importance of *Abhyanga*. So, it is high time to show some light to this very much rejuvenating as well as relaxing natural and powerful method of *Abhyanga* to establish some facts about it before the world. It has been said that *Abhyanga* should be done in Anuloma direction i.e., in the direction of hair growth. To give complete benefits of *Abhyanga* the knowledge about muscles (origin, insertion and course), joints and position of body posture is necessary. For this purpose, massaging procedures along with-it anatomical explanation should be explained.^[1-3]

The medium in *Abhyanga* is our skin, it is the largest surface area as compared to the other senses. Skin has the greatest capacity to receive different signals and to respond to them accordingly. Touch is the first of the senses to become functional. Touch is having both soothing and healing effect. One of the ancient techniques of touching, healing and curing that man has practiced over the years is known in the name of massage. Even before that Hippocrates prescribed oil anointment, using medicated or non-medicated oil in massage has been known since biblical times.

Massage works on the body on both levels:

- Physical
- Psychological

Physical

Rubbing the body produces heat and increases blood circulation, it affects the lymphatic system and supplies more nourishment to the blood.

Psychological

Through touch, massage works on the nervous system and affects the circulation of growth hormones.

Need for the Study

Our *Samhitas* (Ayurvedic classics) have sufficient descriptions about *Abhyanga* and its benefits. But detailed explanation regarding the procedural techniques is not there as everything is described in Shloka format. Then with due course of time

commentators of many classics have tried their best to provide some more explanation of this procedure. Yet with the very advancement of modern science those are insufficient now. In the present era, stressful life pattern and for the urban people who hate the ancient practice of daily oil massage, the need for getting easy relaxation through some massage therapist has been highly increasing.^[4] So, for the purpose of giving a crystal view about what the *Abhyanga* or Ayurvedic oil massage is and how it benefits us, is to be studied.

Complete knowledge of *Shadanga Sharir* and its components like *Asthi, Sira, Peshi, Twacha, Marma* and *Dhamani Kandara* etc. are of great importance. As their knowledge is the base of any successful treatment. For this purpose, the physician must have to acquire the knowledge of anatomy and physiology. Although there are different kinds of massage procedures, the basic knowledge of human anatomy is compulsorily needed for all fruitful therapies. In classics as there no proper explanation of mode of action of *Abhyanga*, hence it has to be explained properly that how does our body react to the therapy of oil massage.

Importance of *Twacha* (Skin) in *Abhyanga*

Acharya Vagbhata warns that the sense organs should neither be strained very much nor should they be fondled very much. In the first chapter of *Charaka Samhita* section on principles one finds a description of how pain and pleasure inflict the body: "Excessive use, non-use and inappropriate use of time, intellect and sense objects is the three-fold cause of both mental and physical diseases. Both body and mind are the locations of diseases as well as pleasures. In a later section we find a description of this three-fold cause of disease: "Too much indulgence in very hot and very cold objects and in bath, massage, anointing, etc. is excessive use of tactile objects; total abstinence from them is negative use; and the application of tactile objects such as hot and cold etc. without the usual order; and the touch of uneven surfaces, injury, dirty objects, organisms, etc. is perverted use of tactile objects. In the section on anatomy, *Charaka*

declares that contacting the organ of touch with mind gives rise to pleasure and pain experiences. According to modern human physiology the skin functions as a major sense organ. There are millions of nerve endings underneath the skin which serve as receivers for the body, keeping it informed of changes in the surroundings. Specialized receptors make it possible for the body to detect sensations of light touch (Meissner's corpuscles) and pressure (Pacian corpuscles) as well as pain, heat and cold. The emotional connection to sensory stimulation has long been understood. The classical texts describe this stimulation of the senses as both normal and pleasing.

Modern physiology gives another view of how touch can help physiology by bringing pleasure through direct stimulation skin that is sensory organ of touch. Limbic system mediates pleasure from touching which causes the secretion of hormones physically equivalent to health and happiness. Massage soothes the nervous system and the endocrine system mainly the two true master systems of the body. Both Nervous and endocrine systems work as communication systems connecting all cells with information about what is happening in the body, which provides knowledge and instructions for control and integration. Massage or touching, from the perspective of modern physiology, has been found to increase secretion of growth hormone.^[5]

Abhyanga in Ayurveda

Abhyanga is not just the simple application of oil and massage as it is understood by most of the people. It involves therapeutic considerations such as *Dosha* (bio humors), *Dhatu* (tissues), *Prakriti* (constitution), pharmacological consideration. It can be beneficial for maintaining health and used as a medicine for certain disorders. It can be incorporated into a routine appropriate for almost everyone. *Abhyanga* therapy is an ancient practice which predates the Vedic period. Early humans use to practices these vital methods for maintaining the body to produce flexibility, strength, mobility, and memory which interwoven with the macrocosm.^[6]

The Sanskrit word *Sneha* means both "oil" and "love," and the effects of *Abhyanga* are similar to the effect of saturation with love. Both experiences can give a deep feeling of stability, warmth and comfort. All the Ayurvedic classics have described the various benefits of *Abhyanga* along with its contra indications. There is no such description about the procedure of *Abhyanga* except the commentary of *Dalhana*, who mentioned that *Abhyanga* should be applied in *Anuloma* (downward) direction. Again, in later period, Shri Kasture has described the specific movements of *Abhyanga* in limbs and joints. He told that in the limb *Abhyanga* should be practiced in the direction of hair growth. This is probably because, it will do discomfort to the receivers as *Abhyanga* is applied in opposite direction of the hair growth, then it may cause breaking of the hairs as well as. The logic behind circular movements over the joints may be the presence of lymph nodes and co-lateral venous networks around the areas. Massing these are as may be improving the lymphatic drainage as well as venous drainage of the respected areas.

Abhyanga procedure has gained great significance in the clinical practice, Considering these advantageous effects of this special maneuver in the promotion and maintenance of health in the healthy, as well as cure of illness in diseased. This process of manipulating skin and muscles is highly recommended in Ayurveda for routine practice even for a fit person who has the conscious of happy healthy life. *Acharya Charaka* gives a simile that wooden wheel which becomes smoother and stronger by proper application of oil in a regular manner and thus prevents the wear and tear, in the same way application of oil for body on a daily basis i.e., *Abhyanga* procedure prevents the degenerative changes of the body.^[6]

According to Haris Johari the region of spine and head should be massaged as a unit as they develop in embryonic life together as a unit. In the region of pelvis to toes, the *Prana* or vital force flows downwards as the body pushes against the earth and the force of gravity with the legs. The upper limbs form a co-ordinate whole to draw energy towards the body. He explained that during back massage strokes

must be applied in upward direction as the opposite movement will be applicable only for sex play. Here we can analyze that the reason behind the directions of downward strokes may be the pattern of the muscle shape, as they are mostly linear in shape in the limbs and their insertions are also in the distal part of the limbs, so the massage manipulations are performed in downward direction to enhance the muscular blood circulation. In the back region the direction for massage is upward, may be because, here also the insertions of the muscles are superior to the origin, so the reason for massaging the back in upward direction is the same as of the limb massage.

Methods of Abhyanga

The patient is undressed to minimum clothes and asked to sit in the *Dhara* table upright and oil is applied to the entire body from scalp to soles. He/she is then made to lie on his/her back and this position is ideal for anointing oil to the chest and abdomen and anterior aspect of the limbs. Face is also best manipulated in the same position. After this patient is told to rest on his/her left side. Right side of the back, trunk, right shoulder, right arm and outer side of the right hip and lower limb are easily accessible in this position. Right lateral position is just opposite of left lateral position. In prone position the patient is advised to rest on his/her abdomen. The back, buttocks, posterior side of the limbs and sole are easily treated with oil in this position.

Indications of Abhyanga

1. Abhyanga as a daily routine:

It has been included in the *Dinacharya* (daily routines) by our *Acharyas* to improve the progress in health in hale and healthy. Regular practice of *Abhyanga* is mainly advocated for the purpose to maintain the physical fitness on daily basis.

2. Abhyanga in trivial manifestations:

Natural urges need to be voided as and when they manifest, otherwise they causes Imbalance of *Dosha* and produce symptoms. Suppressing these urges will produces certain symptoms. Among these some of the symptoms *Abhyanga* has been advised for the

treatment and they are suppressing the urges of *Mutra, Shakrit, Shukra, Adhovata, Vamathu, Kshut, Nidra, Shramaswasa* etc.

3. Seasons wise Abhyanga:

Abhyanga is advised to protect the body from the biting cold of *Hemant Ritu*. Similarly extreme cold as well as dry weather is characteristic of *Shishira Ritu*. *Abhyanga* is beneficial in this season to counteract the detrimental effect of the cold weather.

4. Abhyanga in different diseases:

Abhyanga is mainly indicated in Vata predominant diseases. *Abhyanga* (Oleation) along with *Swedana* (sudation) brings down the painful and deformed body parts due to aggravated *Vata* into normalcy. The simile given by *Acharya Vagbhata* about *Abhyanga* is worth explaining here. *Vagbhata* says that proper *Snehana* and *Swedana* given to an lifeless dry stick will help to bend the same, then what to say about the living body. Some of the diseases in which *Abhyanga* is indicated in Ayurveda are enlisted below

Contraindications of Abhyanga

Abhyanga is an efficient therapeutic as well as health promoting procedure. In spite of these therapeutic benefits *Abhyanga* is not ideal to practice in the following conditions like; from *Aama* condition), *Saamadasha* (having vitiated dosha in *Aama* state), *Navajwara* (suffering from fever of short duration), *Santarpana Samutha Roga* (diseases caused by over nourishment), *Agnimaandya* (suffering from impaired digestive activity).

Indications of Abhyanga	Contraindications of Abhyanga
1.Vata Vyadhi, 2.Shwayathu, 3.Kushtha	1.Kaphagrastha (suffering from Kaphaja disorders).
4.Switra, 5.Rajayakshma, 6.Twagasrita	2.Ajeerna (suffering from indigestion)
7.Dahajwar, 8.Mutrakricha (Vatika)	3.Krita Samshodhana (for whom underwent Shodhana Procedure)
9.Vridhhi (Vatika), 10.Gulma	4.Aama (suffering from Aama

	condition)
11.Madatyaya (Vatika), 12.Jeernajwara	5.Saamadosh (having vitiated Dosha in Aama state)
13.Sheetajwar, 14.Rakta Pitta,	6.Navajwara (newly manifested fever)
14.Rakta Pitta, 15.Vata Rakta	7.Santarpana Samuttha Roga (diseases caused by over nourishment).
16. Hidma, 17.Kasa and Shwasa	8.Agnimaandya (suffering from impaired digestive activity)

Therapeutic utility of Abhyanga

Abhyanga is not merely application of oli and maneuvers rather it maintains the excellence of body tissues, if the oil applied is according to the nature of the patient. So, it is recommended in normal persons for routine daily practice. Further, when the oil is selected according to disease specific in the diseased, it cures the diseases also.

These are the some of the useful effects like - *Mrijaprada* (cleanses dirt), *Varnaprada* (improves the body complexion), *Twakdardhyakara* (improves the elasticity of skin), *Vyadhikshamatwa* (restore the natural immunity), *Jarahara* (rejuvenates body tissues, promotes health and prevents aging process), *Vatahara* (alleviates *Vata Dosha*), *Kaphahara* (alleviates *Kapha Dosha*), *Abhighata Sahyatva* (helps to sustain the post trauma effect if any), *Kleshasaha* (helps to overcome anxiety as well as stress), *Shramahara* (relaxes muscle and relieves fatigue), *Balavan* (improves the physical strength), *Dhatupushti Janana* (promotes the excellence of body tissues), *Priyadarshana* (beautifies the body figure), *Swapna Kara* (induces sound sleep), *Drishhti Prasadakar* (improves eyesight), *Pushtikara* (nourishment the body tissues), *Ayushkara* (promotes one's life span).

Absorption of Sneha

The oil applied to the body surface in different procedures of *Abhyanga*, were absorbed and distributed to the whole body and show systemic or generalized effect. The absorption as well as distribution of the oil with the herbal ingredients

impregnated in it takes specific duration and the same is detailed in the following lines (Table 1).

Table 1: Shows the Abhyanga Kaala (Penetrating time of oil) of different Dhātu of the body.

SN	Name of the Dhātu (body tissue)	Penetrating time of oil
1.	<i>Roma Kupa</i>	300 Maatra (95 sec)
2.	<i>Twak</i>	400 Maatra (133sec)
3.	<i>Rakta</i>	500 Maatra (160sec)
4.	<i>Mamsa</i>	600 Maatra (190sec)
5.	<i>Meda</i>	700 Maatra (228sec)
6.	<i>Asthi</i>	800 Maatra (240 sec)
7.	<i>Majja</i>	900 Maatra (280sec)

Kaala for Abhyanga (time for procedure)

Preparation of the patient: Early morning hours are ideal for *Abhyanga* Karma. The patient should be in empty stomach and the food that is consumed in the previous day should be digested properly.

Different postures of Abhyanga

Commonly employed postures for *Abhyanga* are as follows:

1. Sitting upright with knees extended
2. Supine position
3. Left lateral position
4. Supine position
5. Right lateral position
6. Supine position
7. Sitting upright with knees extended

Alternative postures are:

1. Sitting upright with knees extended
2. Supine position
3. Left lateral position
4. Right lateral position

5. Prone position

After smearing the oil, each part of the body is massaged one after the other. Therapist moves his palms on patient's body surface in a direction similar to the orientation of hair in these parts. This is the general principle of *Abhyanga* technique.

Absorption through skin

In humans, mainly subcutaneous absorption occurs from the body surface that to through the hair follicles occurs. But the follicles in humans occupy a very small a portion of the total integument to be of concerned matter. Absorption through the sweat gland and sebaceous glands generally appears to be minor. When the medicament is rubbed on vigorously, the total quantity of substance (medicated or non-medicated oil) that is forced into the hair follicles and glands is increased. Rubbing also forces some material through the stratum corneum without molecular dispersion and diffusion through the barrier. By this explanation we can say that massaging the skin with some oil may help in the absorption of it through skin layers.

Role of *Bhrajaka Pitta* in mode of action of *Abhyanga*

Bhrajaka Pitta is located in the skin. It imparts the characteristics of color and luster, so it is termed as *Bhrajaka*. *Acharya Charaka* has also described that normal *Pitta* is basic cause for production of normal and abnormal color of the skin as well as the normal and abnormal temperature of the body. The variations in the colour of the skin are the functions of the *Bhrajaka Pitta* which is presenting in the skin. Arunadutta the Commentator of *Ashtanga Hridaya* has described the *Bhrajaka Pitta* and its functions like *Deepana* and *Pachana*. The substances applied on the skin by *Abhyanga*, *Lepana* and *Parisheka* are being absorbed and assimilated by the *Bhrajaka Pitta*. Thus *Abhyanga*, *Parisheka* etc. do their action properly only after being digested by *Bhrajaka Pitta*, as no substance can act properly without digestion. Commentator *Acharya Indu* stated that roughness and hardness of skin is reduced after proper *Abhyanga* procedure, so from the above explanation we can say

that *Abhyanga* helps to improve the quality of skin by getting digested by the *Bhrajaka Pitta*.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Detailed description of *Abhyanga* and its explanations are not available in the main classics of Ayurveda. One of the reasons for this maybe it is written in *Sutra* form and we are unable to decode it and second major being missing of many manuscripts. As the time passed by the commentators have tried their best to establish their thoughts about the *Abhyanga* on the basis of the main texts. Specifically rubbing improves the females' complexion and gives a cheerful appearance, beauty, cleanliness, and suppleness to the female form. Friction mechanism pacifies *Vata*, cures itches, rashes and eruptions due its action. Therefore, by the Law of similarity and dissimilarity the heat generated in this fashion balances the cold *Vata* and also helps liquefy impurities which block physiology and the motion of rubbing provides the impetus for moving the impurities to the channels of elimination. *Acharya Sushruta* has described 107 points (*Marmas*) in the *Sharir Sthana* 6th chapter. These are most lively in expressing the connection of Consciousness (our most fundamental nature) to physiology. It is said that touching these vital points can have both good and bad results. Proper *Abhyanga* over these points (including such exercise as *Yogasana*) helps dissolve stresses or remove blocks accumulated there. Removing stress improves physiology directly. *Sushruta* also explains that explained the effects of rubbing with characteristic emphasis upon the *Pitta* value that rubbing and friction tend to dilate the orifice of the (superficial) ducts and increase the temperature of the skin.

Balanced physiology is the best means of preventing disease and health can mean longer life. *Acharya Charaka* states that appetite is normalized by sesame oil application. Appetite and digestion go hand-in-hand. Appetite is the normal or healthy desire for food but hunger is variable according to digestion. If digestion is too speedy then hunger can become voracious, for example. Digestion is such an important process according to Ayurveda; it is

regarded as the root of all health. The digestive fire actually determines how well sesame oil can be utilized by the body through *Bhrajaka Pitta*. As we have seen above sesame oil helps to promote balanced functioning, by balancing *Vata*, the wind that fans the fire is balanced (*Samana*); by balancing *Pitta* the digestion of the food is balanced (*Pachana*); and by balancing *Kapha* the food is appropriately moistened and loosened for digestion (*Kledana*).

Thus, *Abhyanga* also contributes to a qualitatively better life by promoting many side-benefits. The functioning of the sense organs benefits from the lubricating and releasing actions of sesame oil. Sensitivity is proportionate to proper functioning. The sesame oil makes tissue stronger and more flexible. This means that the senses can work efficiently. The fact that dirt, toxins and other stresses are released by the presence of sesame oil means that these “filters”, which cloud perceptions, cease to impair sensitivity and accuracy of sensory experience. Therefore, to expect good hearing, taste, healthy sensitivity to touch, vision and smell from regular application of sesame oil.

Massage therapy which is popularly practiced in the western countries has been summarized to the part wise massage techniques of the body using the anatomical explanation. The anatomical landmarks are mentioned along with the structures which are directly related with massage. So, it is mandatory for a clinician to know the anatomical structures related to that part, as this prevents from damaging any structures by inappropriate technique. Modern pharmacology describes that body rubbing improves the absorption through skin layers. This may be the reason for why after *Abhyanga*, *Mardana* (rubbing) in the classical texts also have been indicated. Massage mainly affects the nervous system and endocrine system of our body. These two systems are related with each other. Excitation of these two systems play great role in affecting the other systems of the body. Massage has local and systemic effects on the body. It mainly affects the nervous system and endocrine system. But also helps in increasing blood circulation to the skin. It increases circulation to massaged area,

bringing more oxygenated blood and nutrients to the area which in turn reduces muscle fatigue and soreness. This increase in circulation also aids the removal of toxins and waste products from the muscle. It relieves muscular tightness, fatigue, stiffness and spasms.

CONCLUSION

All the benefits of *Abhyanga* are directly or indirectly related with the stimulation of autonomic nervous system and central nervous system. Anatomical knowledge of body is quite beneficial while attempting the process of *Abhyanga*. *Abhyanga* should be done in *Anuloma* (to the direction of hair growth) to prevent any damage to the hair roots. It is practiced in circular movements in the joints to facilitate the lymph drainage and venous drainage as most of the lymph nodes are situated in the joint spaces and collateral venous networks are also there in the joint regions so circular movements help in emptying the vessels. In total regular practices of *Abhyanga* improves one's health.

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