

Ayurveda: Yoga's Sister Science

Sacred oil meditation

How a liquid ayurvedic therapy, Shirodhara, can restore calmness and balance. *By Nathalie Baron*

There is a unique therapy in ayurveda called shirodhara which cannot be found in any other alternative health systems. Once only reserved for Maharajahs, this unique therapy is definitely a royal treatment. Shirodhara involves the gentle pouring of a warm liquid, generally sesame oil, over the forehead in a set of patterns. The warm oil feels like the caress of a warm and fragrant breeze that soothes away mental aches and pains. The soft and rhythmic flow makes you drift into a world of peace and tranquility, akin to a deep meditation.

Shirodhara is offered by ayurveda to soothe and rebalance the nervous system of over-stressed, depressed, anxious or mentally tired clients. It eases stress-related diseases and is particularly used to restore blissful sleep and vitality of mind and body. Traditionally in India, shirodhara is used to alleviate conditions such as neurological disorders, memory loss, insomnia and diseases of the senses such as eye disease, sinusitis, tinnitus and vertigo.

Liquid therapy

When receiving a shirodhara, the client lies down on a massage table face up and the neck of the person is adjusted in a comfortable position. A headband is placed on the brow line to protect the eyes. Warm liquid is poured from a suspended copper or clay vessel in a steady stream from a height and thickness regulated according to the person's need.

The liquid used in this restorative therapy depends on what is being treated; sesame oil is usually used but it could include medicated oils, milk or buttermilk. The treatment lasts between 30 to 60 minutes and can be repeated daily or every few days, depending on the severity of the symptoms, until wellbeing is restored.

Spiritual level

Shirodhara is a unique therapy in that it not only works on the physical body but also on the spiritual body, the subtle network of energy centres called chakras and the transient energy channels that connect them. Chakras are wheels of energy that act as gateways between the spiritual and physical realms. They are meeting places of the mind, body and soul and as such correspond in the body to physical organs, nerve centres, glands and plexuses. The seven chakras are situated along the spine starting from its base with the root chakra, moving on to the sacral, solar plexus, heart, throat and brow chakras and culminating at the top of the head with the crown chakra. When they become blocked or unbalanced the free flow of prana, the non-physical life energy that is responsible for our 'aliveness', is hindered. This, in turn, affects bodily functions and thought processes and may lead to ill health. For instance, negative thoughts, anxiety and fear may develop and lead to depression.

Clearing the chakras

Shirodhara aims to clear and rebalance the two head chakras - the brow chakra and the crown chakra - and their corresponding physical counterparts, the pituitary and pineal glands. The brow chakra - which is also called the third eye - is situated in the middle of the forehead, slightly above the gap in between the eyebrows. In the Hindu religion, this is the spot where Shiva, the God of destruction and renewal, bears on his forehead a mystical third eye which once opened leads into the inner realms of higher spirituality. The crown chakra, often described as a lotus flower with a thousand petals, is the seat of the highest divine consciousness. It is situated four finger breadths away from the crown of the head. This is where Shiva as the omniscient master of yoga resides in complete oneness with his soul. It is the place of absolute stillness, where mind, body and spirit unite and enlightenment happens. In Eastern traditions, the mind is likened to a budding flower waiting to open. The warm flow of shirodhara stimulates the crown chakra and gently opens up the thousand petalled lotus nestled into the dark pools of our minds.

Physical realm

On the physical plane, the brow and crown chakras are part of what modern medicine calls the endocrine system, a network of glands, which secrete hormones that regulate the body. The brow chakra is linked to the pituitary gland and the crown chakra corresponds to the pituitary and pineal glands.

The pituitary gland is the size of a small pea nestled in the base of our brain. Often coined as the master gland, the pituitary gland is considered to be the most important component of the endocrine system. It regulates metabolism, growth and development, tissue function, blood pressure and produces endorphins that act as pain relief. Its function can be influenced by our emotions and seasonal changes.

The pineal gland, a small organ the size of a grain of rice cocooned deep inside the brain, secretes two hormones which are vital to our mental health. Melatonin regulates our sleeping patterns and serotonin helps maintain a happy and balanced state of mind. When you consider that anti-depressant drugs such as Prozac are prescribed to raise the serotonin levels to induce a sense of happiness and wellbeing, it is not difficult to understand why ayurveda considers shirodhara to be the natural answer to depression. During shirodhara, the soft fall of the warm liquid over the forehead massages the pituitary and pineal glands which rebalances the endocrine and nervous systems. It also opens up and cleanses the brow and crown chakras and gently carries you into a high state of meditative contemplation. ☸

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A personal tale

Shirodhara is what attracted me to ayurveda. My first experience of ayurveda was in the sacred city of Varanasi in India where I received my first shirodhara. The feeling was almost indescribable - my mind fell deep in stillness and from its depth rose a peace so profound that all my worries melted away.

I had read extensively about yogic meditation and was always in awe of the discipline it took to achieve such calmness of mind. From my experience, shirodhara therapy was like a sacred oil meditation that gave me a glimpse of what it felt like to live in the moment unhindered by thoughts or feelings. I thought I had caught an impression of what it might be like to achieve enlightenment. I was hooked.

Many years have passed since that day and I have given since countless shirodhara therapies and each time I still have that starry eyed amazement when I see the transformation in my clients. Before receiving shirodhara, my clients are typically agitated, stressed, anxious and incapable of sitting still. Sometimes, they are depressed. They are tired and suffering from broken sleep or insomnia. During their first session they usually fall in a deep meditative sleep and wake up feeling like they had a proper night's sleep, refreshed and calm. And, as other sessions follow, I see the face of my clients changing from tensed, pale and tired to relaxed and gleaming with tranquility and vitality.

Shirodhara is an exceptional therapy not to be missed. It is a unique, mind-opening and exquisite relaxation experience that will leave you sparkling with contentment.