Panchakarma: The Ayurvedic Science of Detoxification and Rejuvenation

Ayurveda[i] [1], which literally means the knowledge of life is the traditional healing science of India. Viewing disease as the natural end result of living out of harmony with our environment, Ayurveda emphasizes reestablishing harmony and balance as the means of recreating a state of optimal health in our bodies and minds. While Ayurvedic methods utilize many therapies including herbs, diet, aromatherapy, color therapy, mantras, yoga, meditation and general lifestyle counseling, the most profound of all treatments is that of Pancha Karmai.
Pancha Karma is the traditional form of detoxification of the body and mind that facilitates rejuvenation. It has been utilized for thousands of years as a method of staying healthy, young and vital.
According to Dr. Deepak Chopra M.D. ,"The value of Pancha Karma is that it offers systematic treatment for dislodging and flushing toxins from every cell, using the same organs of elimination that the body naturally employs -- sweat glands, blood vessels, the urinary tract and the intestines."
Pancha Karma is unlike any other detoxification program because it is fundamentally designed to remove a different form of toxin. While many toxins exist in our environment which accumulate and harm our bodies, Ayurvedic Pancha Karma addresses a special toxin called ama which is formed within our own bodies.

Ama is the by-product of inadequate digestion. It has the qualities of stickiness and heaviness. In our bodies it clogs our systems and damages our tissues. It is among the most damaging of forces in our bodies and contributes to disease.
Here is an analogy to help you understand how ama is formed. Imagine that there is a fire inside your stomach. Think of a campfire. If the fire is weak, it cannot burn up the wood put on it. Instead, the wood smolders and begins to smoke. In the end, charred bits are left and the wood is not efficiently turned into ash.
Poor digestive fire, or digestive strength, leads to food being improperly digested. This results in gas, bloating, burning indigestion, or constipation. In addition, a residue of this poorly digested food accumulates in your digestive tract and overflows into your bodily systems. This residue is called ama.
Ayurveda links the occurrence of ama in the body and a weak digestive system to the cause of such chronic conditions such as candida, chronic fatigue syndrome, migraine headaches, chronic respiratory disease and many other conditions. The process of Pancha Karma removes ama and clears the way for the body to re-establish an internal state of balance and harmony.
Ama may be present in the body if there is a coating on the tongue. A normal tongue appears pink throughout, but as ama accumulates in the digestive system, the tongue may appear with a white, yellow, green or gray film over it. In addition, in some cases the body and breath develop a strong odor and the stool becomes dense and sinks to the bottom of the toilet. (According to Ayurveda, the normal stool should float). If you have any of these signs, panchakarma treatment may be indicated.

The Process of Pancha Karma

Pancha Karma therapy begins with proper preparation. This includes several days or weeks of a special diet and herbs which begin the process of loosening up the ama and bringing it back to the digestive system for elimination. While the person is eating special foods and taking special herbs, oil and heat therapies are applied. These include the deeply relaxing therapies of Shirodhara, Ayurvedic massage, and Swedana.
Shirodhara is a unique therapy where the client lies down upon a massage table with their eyes covered. Then, a specially prepared warm herbal oil is poured in a thin steady stream through a spicket directly onto the forehead and sixth chakra. This blissful therapy purifies the mind, alleviates anxiety, reduces headaches and expands awareness. Shirodhara can be administered by itself or as part of a Pancha Karma regime.

During Ayurvedic massage two practitioners perform a choreographed hand dance upon the body. Using oils blended with special herbs, this form of massage specifically loosens up the ama stored in

the tissues so that it can move back to the digestive system. Not only is it cleansing, but it is deeply relaxing. Ayurvedic massage can be administered by itself or as a part of Pancha Karma.
Swedana is a full-body steam therapy. Special herbs are fused into the steam and together the heat and herbs dilate the channel systems of the body allowing the stored ama to move back into the digestive system.
Once all of the ama is back in the digestive system, the next phase is to eliminate it from the body. This is achieved by the administration of a purgative to cleanse the small intestine and herbal enemas to cleanse the colon. A special form of cleansing is applied to the sinuses called nasya. Following the application of oil and heat over the sinuses, the herbal oils are administered directly into the nasal passages. This procedure not only eliminates ama but is helpful in the treatment of chronic allergic sinusitis and sinus headaches.

Rejuvenation

With the body clear of toxins and ama, it is much like a clean slate. Now the internal energy of the body can be rebuilt. The rebuilding process strengthens the digestive system and the immune system and entails taking additional special foods and herbs. These herbs are designed to enhance the strength of immune system and are revered for extending life.
The end result of Pancha Karma is an optimally functioning digestive system and renewed internal energy. After receiving Pancha Karma the mind is light and clear, the body is pure and the energy is high. For many it is a life-changing experience.
Dr. David Frawley, renowned Vedic scholar says in his book, Ayurveda and the Mind, "Pancha Karma is the main Ayurvedic method for physical purification. It is useful for physical problems caused by excesses of the three doshas. Yet it can also be helpful for psychological problems caused by internal factors, emotions and karma.”
Pancha Karma is traditionally used in the healing of many diseases. It is an intensive therapy best performed at a time when the patient has adequate time to rest. Brief Pancha Karma programs last 7 days. This is followed by a period of rejuvenation which can be done at home. Extensive programs can be designed for up to one month.

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