



A CRITICAL REVIEW OF ABHYANGA WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO ITS CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

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ABSTRACT

Abhyanga is one of the foremost massage maneuvers mentioned in the Ayurvedic texts like Brihatrayi and Laghutrayi. It is the oldest technique for healing, preventing diseases and promoting health. It has been included in the Dinacharya and also as the treatment measure for a variety of diseases. It is also a part of the pre-therapeutic procedures of Panchakarma. Abhyanga improves blood circulation (arterial as well as venous), lymphatic flow and thus offers nourishment to the body cells. It not only de-stresses the whole body but also strengthens the nervous system, improves blood circulation, removes toxins and improves the overall well-being of the person. Besides offering an immuno-modulatory action, it improves the quality of life thus benefitting the persons of all the ages. The ancient Ayurvedic literature as well as modern references was referred to have a critical study of the classification of massage; to compare between Abhyanga and Massage; to study the mode of action according to Ayurvedic and modern view. This being the Bahiparimarjana Chikitsa plays a vital role in improving the quality of life, thus fulfilling the basic motto of Ayurveda. Modern studies have proven that, Abhyanga has potential psychogenic and physiologic benefits. It can certainly be said that Abhyanga, "Adds life to years" rather than "Years to life" and thus bears a strong contemporary relevance. This review article is meant to have a critical review of Abhyanga with special reference to its contemporary relevance.

Keywords: Abhyanga, Murdha taila, Nidrajanya Bhava, oleation, Snehana

INTRODUCTION

According to Ayurveda, Abhyanga is one of the Bahiparimarjana Chikitsa (external oleation therapy). Charaka states that the procedure which causes Snehana (unctuousness), Kledana (fluidity), Mriduta (softness) and Snigdghata (moistness) in the body is called as Snehana Karma (oleation therapy)¹. It has the multi-faceted benefits which ranges from the prevention, rejuvenation to the cure of the diseases. Abhyanga, due to its utmost importance has formed an integral part of the Dinacharya (daily regimen) and in the treatment of the Vatavyadhis, Shula, Stambha etc. Abhyanga assists in the trans-dermal absorption of the Snehadravys as skin is the largest organ of the body. Modern pharmacology states that absorption through skin can be enhanced by suspending the drug in the liquid media and rubbing the same on the skin². This influences the soft tissue³ of the body and relax the soft tissues and thus relieves the pain. It can stimulate the lymphatic system and thereby removes the bodily toxins generated in the muscles which results into relaxation of the muscular tissue. Also, muscle tension is reduced⁴. As per American Massage Therapy Association, Massage is a manual soft tissue manipulation like holding, causing movement and /or applying pressure to the body⁵. Contemporary research reveals that massage helps in decreasing heart rate and blood pressure⁶⁻¹¹. The bipolar disorders like anxiety¹², dementia¹³ and stress¹⁴⁻¹⁵ are also relieved by the Abhyanga. Preterm babies have reported body weight gain¹⁶. It reduces intensity of pain¹⁷⁻¹⁹, especially backache²⁰. The cancer related symptoms like nausea, pain²¹⁻²³ are also reduced with Abhyanga. The back massage also improves the sleep pattern in critically ill patients²⁴. Abhyanga is not a simple procedure of application of oil all over the body. It is a maneuver that helps in maintaining the excellence of tissues²⁵. This article is an attempt to critically review the role of Abhyanga and its contemporary relevance.

Etymology of Abhyanga

According to Amarkosha, 'Abhi' Upasarga added to 'Anga' makes the word 'Abhyanga', meaning some specific body movements done by using the Sneha (Ghrit, Taila etc.)

Definition

The Samvahana of the body done in the same direction of the body hair, along with the Snehadravya is called as Abhyanga.

Synonyms

Abhyanjana- According to Shabda Kalpadruma, Abhyanjana means to anoint or to smear (lepana)
Snehana- Achaspamyam, Snehana means to be adhesive or to be attached to.

Ashraya Ashrayi Siddhanta

Twak is the Ashraya for Vata and Bhrajaka Pitta. Abhyanga is done on Twak, Twak being the site of Vata, Abhyanga is Vatahara predominantly due to its Guna. Absorption of the dravyas applied on skin is through the Bhrajaka Pitta²⁶.

Types

According to Kamasutra²⁷

Samvahana
Kesha-mardana
Utsadana

On the basis of classification of Massage

- Based on the technique adopted
 - Stroking
 - Pressure
 - Percussion
 - Vibration

- Based on the tissue approached
 - Light massage
 - Deep massage
- Based on the part of the body used
 - General massage
 - Local massage
- Based on the means of application of pressure
 - Manual massage
 - Mechanical massage
- Based on the nature of drug used
 - Dry massage
 - Powder massage
 - Oil massage
- Based on the basis of movements²⁸
 - Touch- light massage done with fingers
 - Stroke- done with a movement of one / both palms slowly
 - Friction- grasping the body part and moving with a little pressure
 - Kneading- alternative compression of the tissues by grasping them firmly against the underlined body surfaces, muscle mixing
 - Vibration- fine vibrations / shaking movements done through fingers/ palms
 - Percussion- applied with varying degree of force
 - Joint movements- Assisted as well as resisted body movements are applied.
- Based on the application methods²⁹
 - Samvahana- It means application or just smearing of oil over the body parts and also useful in newborn care.
 - Parisheka- It means sprinkling of oil, used immediately after birth to relieve the stress of labour while passing through birth canal and alleviate the increased Vata Dosh. It is included in Jatamatra Paricharya.
 - Abhyanga- It means application of oil on whole body or body parts with optimum pressure and in particular directions and applying the strokes. It is not directly quoted in protocol^{30,31}.
 - Mardana- Application of oil or dry powder over body or body parts with enough pressure along with squeezing of body muscles in appropriate manner.

Indications of Abhyanga

- As a Dinacharya procedure to maintain the health.
- Shiro Abhyanga- Dry scalp, itching (Arunshika)
- Taila Abhyanga- Bala, Vriddha, Krishna persons
- Diseases of hair- Darunaka, Khalitya, Palitya etc.

Contra Indications of Abhyanga^{32,33}

- Ajirna, Nava Jwara, Taruna Jwara- it leads to Krichhra Sadhya or Asadhya Awastha due to excessive Ama-nirmiti.
- Just after Samshodhana Karma like Vamana, Virechana, Niruha Basti- Since the person who had undergone these Shodhana Karmas has a Durbal Agni and such Abhyanga will further lead to Agnimandya.
- Netra Roga, Karna Roga, Peenasa, Agnimandya, Atisara, Adhmana.
- Pittaja Vyadhi, Trishna, Rakta Pitta, Prameha and Ati-Kshudhita.
- Kaphaja Vyadhi and Santarpanaja Vyadhi.
- Immediately after consumption of food, Ruksha and Abhishyandi Ahara.
- Immediately after Tarpana and Snehapana Kriya.
- Immediately after Snana, Vyayama, Divaswapna, Vegadharana, Prajagarana, Sheeta Vayusevana.

Abhyanga technique³⁴

The Abhyanga technique is not elaborated in the major classics of Ayurveda. Rigveda was the first treatise in which Abhyanga is said to be done by hands and digits and the stroke or touch should be gentle. This gentle pressure is that which is tolerated by the individual.

Prerequisites to perform Abhyanga

To be performed only when a person has digested the previous food taken and when he feels Kshudhita and Trisharta.

Time of Abhyanga

- To be practiced daily amongst the children.
- To be practiced once in a day or on alternate days or once in three days. It does not disturb the equilibrium of the Doshas and hence does not vitiate the Doshas.

Direction of Abhyanga

- Generally, to be done in Anuloma Gati (in the same direction to those of the hair)
- According to Dosh predominance-
 - Vata Dosh- Anuloma Gati
 - Kapha Dosh- Pratiloma Gati
 - Pitta Dosh- Alternate Anuloma Gati and Pratiloma Gati

Abhyanga Dravya

- Sukhoshna (lukewarm) Sneha (oil or ghee)
- Vasa- prepared with Doshaghna dravyas
- Generally lukewarm oil is used for Abhyanga, but cold oil may use in Shirobhyanga
- Winter season- warm oil
- Summer season- cold oil

Selection of Oil for Abhyanga

According to Vagbhata, sesame oil possesses the properties like penetrating deep into the tissues, and spreading throughout the body fast, capable of entering into even minute pores, hot in potency, not increasing Kapha. According to Dalhana, sesame oil penetrates into the deepest level of tissues in only 5-10 minutes.

Importance of Abhyanga as a Poorvakarma³⁵

Abhyanga imparts Snigdhatva to the body which makes the body suitable for Shodhana karma. Abhyanga is done as a Purvakarma in most of the Shodhanakarmas. Abhyanga produces Strotovishodhana, Abhishyandanam of the Doshas and Vata which is aggravated, thereby moving the aggravated Dosh from Shakha to Koshtha after which the Doshas can be easily removed through Shodhanakarma.

Importance of Abhyanga as a Pradhanakarma³⁶

The Bahyarogamarga consists of Raktadi Dhatus and Tvak, which is a site for the diseases like Mashaka, Vyanga, Gandalaji, Arbuda etc. for which Abhyanga is considered as treatment because the root of action of Abhyanga is Tvak. Hence Abhyanga can be considered as Pradhanakarma where Vatadosha is aggravated.

Padabhyanga and Marma³⁷

Pada gives Ashraya to the following Marmas-
Kurchashira- Snayu Marma
Talahridaya- Kalantara Pranahara Marma
Kurcha- Vaikalyakara Marma
Kshiptam- Kalantara Pranahara Marma

Abhyanga is one of the effective lines of treatment in most of all Marmavidha conditions.

Table 1: Effect of Abhyanga on Sharir Dhatu³⁸

| Tissue | Time | |
|---|-------|---------|
| | Matra | Seconds |
| Hair follicles (Kesha) | 300 | 95 |
| Skin (Tvacha) | 400 | 127 |
| Blood (Rakta Dhatu) | 500 | 159 |
| Muscular tissue (Mamsa Dhatu) | 600 | 190 |
| Fat (Meda Dhatu) | 700 | 220 |
| Bones (Asthi Dhatu) | 800 | 254 |
| Nervous tissue or bone marrow (Majja Dhatu) | 900 | 285 |

Benefits of Abhyanga³⁹⁻⁴⁰

- Jarahara- Slows down and corrects the aging process; nourishes and increases the Dhatu strength⁴¹.
- Shramahara- Helps to overcome the fatigue caused by physical activities
- Vatahara- Corrects the vitiation of Vatadosha. It helps in the promotion and regulation of the proper function of Vata.
- Drishtiprasadakara- The diseases of eye like Timira and other diseases, which are caused due to ageing could be prevented and cured by Abhyanga.
- Pushtikara- It nourishes all the Dhatus of the body.
- Ayushya- It promotes longevity of an individual. The functions of the vital organs and tissues are improved, and life span is promoted.
- Swapnakara- Overcomes sleeplessness and other mental ailments
- Tvakdardhyakara- Offers strength even to those of old age, offers sturdiness of the body.
- Kleshasaha- Due to sturdiness, body becomes capable to tolerate the stress and strains of life⁴².
- Abhighata Abhihitam- those having a regular Abhyanga are less vulnerable to the body troubles as compared to others⁴³
- Kapha-Vatanirodhana- According to Sushruta, Abhyanga maintains the proper balance of Kapha and Vata⁴⁴
- Varna-Balaprada- Acts as the body complexion promoter and gives strength to the person.

Health benefits of Massage⁴⁵

Reduces muscle tension-

- Massage loosens the contracted, shortened, hardened muscles
- It may stimulate the flaccid muscles
- The reduced muscle tension ensures the proper circulation of blood and movement of lymph in that area

Improves blood circulation-

- The direct/indirect stimulation of the nerves that supply the internal organs, results into the dilation of these blood vessels and thereby increases 10%-15% blood supply

Ensures better lymph movement-

- Muscular contraction induces a pumping effect that facilitates the movement of lymph (containing by-products of metabolism)

Increased mobility and range of motion of joints-

- A gentle stretching action to both the muscles and connective tissues which support the muscles, and many other parts of the body helps to keep these tissues elastic. This results into an increased mobility and a range of motion of joints.

Stimulates or soothes nervous system-

- Massage establishes a fine tuning of the body and minds either by stimulation or soothing action.

Enhances skin condition-

- Improves the function of the sebaceous and sweat glands, which maintains the lubrication of the skin at the optimum level

Better digestion and intestinal function-

- Massage increases body's secretions and excretions
- Increased production of gastric juices, saliva and urine
- Increased excretion of nitrogen, inorganic phosphorus and salt
- Increased metabolic rate results into better digestion and intestinal function

Relieves acute and chronic pain-

- Massage promotes recovery from the fatigue and from body aches and pains

Enhanced drug absorption-

- Absorption through the skin can be enhanced by suspending the drug in a lipid media like oil and rubbing same on the skin⁴⁶
- This influences the soft tissue of the body and induce relaxation of soft tissues and relieves the pain

Mode of action of Abhyanga

- The Sneha used in Abhyanga reaches up to different Dhatus when it is applied for the sufficient time
- On reaching at the specified Dhatu, it subsides the diseases of that particular Dhatu
- According to Charak, Vayu dominates the Sparshanendriya and its Adhishthana is Tvacha. The Abhyanga is beneficial to the skin, so one should follow it regularly⁴⁷.
- Since, all the Indriyas are in close contact with the mind, the healthy Indriyas ensure a healthy mind. Thus, Abhyanga keeps the body and mind healthy.

Mode of action of Abhyanga according to the Snehana Dravya Guna

Snigdha Guna-

- Main property of the Snehana drug
- Vatahara, Kaphakara
- Vrishya
- Snehana, Kledana and Vishyandana actions at the cellular level of the body

Guru Guna-

- Promotes body strength, Pushtikara
- Nutritious for the body (Hemadri)
- Vatahara, Kaphakara
- Alleviates the morbid Vata, increases the decreased Kapha

Sheeta Guna-

- Promotes calmness of the mind
- Maintains healthy mind by increasing pleasure and enthusiasm
- Prevents fainting and decreases the perspiration
- Stabilizes the muscles and organs

Mridu Guna-

- Promotes flexibility of the body organs, reduces the stiffness

Drava Guna-

- The Snehadravya propagates swiftly all over the body
- It liquefies the Doshas and mobilizes the Doshas by increasing their flowing capacity

Pichhila Guna-

- Promotes longevity, increases body strength
- Aggravates Kapha and produces heaviness

Sara Guna-

- It mobilizes the Doshas and Malas thereby ensuring body purification

Manda Guna-

- The drug diffuses slowly by this property and it remains in the contact of Doshas, Dhatus and Malas for longer time

Sukshma Guna-

- Helps the drug to enter in the Sukshma Strotasa

In a nutshell the effect of Abhyanga can be summarized as-

- Reduces Abhyanga dwesha, induces sleep.
- The gentle massage improves blood circulation to the Kapala pradesha.
- The heat produced during Abhyanga provokes the blood vessels to dilate, which increases blood circulation and promotes healing.
- The effect of pressure and the effect of heat produced by Abhyanga enhance the absorption of the medicine through the skin.

Mode of action of Abhyanga according to Modern view⁴⁸

Abhyanga acts on the skin, which is a site for Vatadosha and Lasika. Thus, Abhyanga directly acts on the lymphatic drainage. Lymph exhibits large amount of amino acid tryptophan.

The internal fluid of the skin is subjected to movement in the massage because of osmotic pressure. Thus, massage results into mechanical hydrostatic pressure in the extra-cellular compartment. Massage helps fluid enter into viscera, tissues and dilute the accumulated toxins. After the completion of procedure, when it refills the peripheral vessels, the diluted toxins are brought into general circulation and during the course; they are expelled out via elimination procedures.

After massage, amino acids like tryptophan increase in the blood. It results into a parallel increase in the neuron transmitter serotonin, which is made from tryptophan at motor ends plates.

The piezoelectricity is derived from pressure. When massage is done along with a Snehadravya, a rhythmic movement creates magnetic field and electricity in the body. By this charging the conductivity of nerves will be increased. Electricity is discharged to nerve fiber at regular intervals and moves in circular pattern.

Interruption to the momentum results into the diseased condition, which may be treated by a massage with a certain pressure. Acetylcholine acts as a transmitter at motor end in the presence of calcium ion and facilitates synaptic action potential.

With the use of a concentrated drug, the absorption rate increases. Percutaneous absorption is observed in the inflammatory condition due to the presence of substances like serotonin.

- Due to rubbing of oil on skin, rubbing and friction tend to dilate the orifice of the superficial ducts and increase the temperature of skin⁴⁹.
- Intercellular permeation⁵⁰.
- The intercellular pathway involves drug diffusing through the continuous lipid matrix. The intercellular domain is a region of alternating structured bi-layers. Consequently, a drug must sequentially partition in to, and diffuse through repeated aqueous and lipid domains. Lipophilic substances such as essential oil components are absorbed more readily as the stratum corneum provides a formidable barrier for hydrophilic compounds, which penetrate more slowly.
- Massage soothes the nervous and the endocrine system which act like the connecting cells. The pleasure from touching is mediated through the limbic system which causes the secretion of hormones physically equivalent to health and happiness. Massage or touching is found to increase secretion of Human Growth Hormone (HGH) which in turn speeds up the movement of digested proteins (amino acids) out of the blood and into the cells, and this accelerates the cells anabolism, hence this action promotes natural growth. It also promotes protein synthesis and reduces oxidation of proteins. HGH also affects the fat and carbohydrates, sexual functions, proper operation of stomach and bowels, liver, immune system and all glandular systems.
- The gate control theory states that massage provides stimulation that helps to block pain signals sent to the brain. It also eases certain chemicals such as serotonin in the body or cause beneficial changes in the body⁵¹.
- A number of immune boosting white blood cells were found significantly higher in patients who received massage versus patients who did not receive massage⁵².

Difference between Abhyanga and Massage⁵³

Massage is not the daily routine procedure like Abhyanga, and be contraindicated in inflammatory conditions, fractures, sprains and strains, while Abhyanga is mainly concerned with the digestion and Kapha Dosha predominance in body of individual.

Table 2: Difference between Abhyanga and Massage⁵³

| Process | Abhyanga | Massage |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Method | Done essentially with a Snigdha dravya e.g. Taila, Ghrita etc. | Done with or without lubricant |
| Uses | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prior therapy for Panchakarma • Included in the daily routine • Can be taken as the main treatment for many medical conditions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can't be used as a prior therapy for Panchakarma • It may not be taken as part of the daily routine • It is not a main treatment; it is always supplementary |
| Indications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For ensuring proper growth and development of a healthy baby • For Neuromuscular disorders | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Healthy baby • Neuromuscular disorders with some physiotherapy practices |
| Contra Indications | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persons suffering from Kaphaja diseases • After the Panchakarma • A person having Ajeerna | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflammatory conditions • Severe body aches • Sprains and strains • Fractures • Dislocations |

Modern research regarding Abhyanga⁵⁴

- Effect of Abhyanga on Lipid profile-
 - Abhyanga is not all having a significant active intervention in the lipid profile
- Regarding Heart rate and blood pressure-
 - Massage helps in decreasing heart rate and blood pressure
- Regarding Bipolar disorders like anxiety, dementia and stress- relieves the patient from these conditions
- Regarding preterm infants- helps them to improve in bodyweight
- Regarding intensity of pain- lowers down the intensity of pain
- Regarding backache- helps to get rid of backache
- Regarding cancer associated symptoms- reduces the cancer associated symptoms like nausea and pain
- Regarding sleep pattern in critically ill patients- back massage improves the sleep pattern in critically ill patients.

DISCUSSION

Abhyanga imparts Snigdhatva, Kleda and Mridutva to the body. These therapeutic properties of Abhyanga are observed due to the Gunas of Snehana Dravya like Snigdha, Guru, Sheeta, Mridu, Drava, Pichhila, Sara, Manda and Sukshma Guna. The Sukshmastrotogamitva induced by the properties of Snehana Dravyas results into the miraculous outcomes of Abhyanga.

Although Abhyanga is a Bahiparimarjan Chikitsa, it offers systemic therapeutic properties. These effects may range from Dosha-Dhatu-Mala, Musculoskeletal system to the central nervous system.

Since skin is the largest organ of the body, drug absorption through skin is supposed to be a good remedial measure. Such drug absorption is enhanced by suspending the drug in liquid media and rubbing the same on the skin.

The Abhyanga done in the scientific manner has been proven to stimulate the lymphatic system. It removes the bodily toxins and ultimately relaxes the muscular tissue. Such a relaxing effect was mentioned by the ancient Ayurvedic texts through the words- Jarahara, Shramahara, Vatahara etc.

Although Abhyanga and Massage are considered to be synonyms, there is a clear demarcation between these two concepts. Massage is not a daily routine procedure like Abhyanga. The modern research regarding massage states that it decreases heart rate and blood pressure. It also relieves the patient from anxiety, dementia and stress related conditions.

Thus, Abhyanga, due to its Vatashamaka properties, regulates the aggravated Vata Dosha, which ultimately streamlines the different activities of the body. Abhyanga, an integral part of Dinacharya, improves the quality of life, benefitting the persons of all ages.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of the critical study of conceptual references, right from the Ayurvedic texts to the contemporary modern texts, it is concluded that Abhyanga plays a vital role in maintaining the health and also treating the diseases, "Swasthasya Swasthyarakshanam, Aturasya Vikaraprashamanam Cha". This being the Bahiparimarjana Chikitsa plays a vital role in improving the quality of life, thus fulfilling the basic motto of Ayurveda.

Abhyanga is not merely a Poorvakarma or a relaxation therapy, but a therapy involving all the basic elements and systems of the body. It is a Poorvakarma of Shodhana Chikitsa and also a Pradhana Karma. Mode of action of Abhyanga seems to coincide with that of the contemporary modern science. Due to its Vatashamaka property, it is responsible for better function of Indriyas. Hence Padabhyanga is responsible for better health of Chakshurindriya while Shirobhyanga for the other Dnyanedriyas and Karmendriyas. Hence it is advocated right from the neonates to the geriatric population. Also, it is one of the effective lines of treatment in most of all Marmavidha conditions.

Modern studies have proven that, Abhyanga has a potential psychogenic and physiologic benefits. It can certainly be said that Abhyanga, "Adds life to years" rather than "Years to life" and thus bears a strong contemporary relevance.

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