

Introduction to Panchakarma

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Panchakarma is the ancient system of Āyurvedic detoxification and rejuvenation therapies designed to facilitate the removal of deep-rooted stresses and toxins in the physiology.

As the life of an individual unfolds, the body encounters many stresses and undergoes innumerable changes as it continuously adapts to its environment. Throughout the days and nights, throughout the changing seasons, and during the different stages in one's life the products of normal metabolism are produced in the tissues and are carried away for elimination via one of three major routes:

- feces
- urine
- perspiration

In addition to physical forms of byproducts which arise, excess bio-energies known as *doshas* (Vata, Pitta, and Kapha) also are being continuously formed and removed from the body by its natural eliminatory processes. Although the pathways for the removal of these excess doshas are multiple, the gastrointestinal tract is the main route for their elimination. Furthermore, specific parts of the gastrointestinal tract are the main site of elimination for a specific dosha: the stomach for Kapha, the jejunum and ileum for Pitta, and the colon for Vata.

Normally the body has the innate ability to efficiently process and remove these waste materials, including the vitiated doshas. However due to one's repeated dietary indiscretions, poor exercise patterns, lifestyle, required pharmaceutical medicines, and genetic predisposition the digestive enzymes, metabolic cofactors, hormones, and neurotransmitters which regulate the body's internal homeostasis become disorganized. This can lead to the accumulation and spread of toxins throughout the physiology resulting in disease. A modern example of this situation occurs when you eat an (nonorganic) apple treated with a pesticide. The chemical is absorbed into the bloodstream and eventually arrives at the liver where it is normally undergoes two biochemical processes to convert the water-insoluble pesticide into a watersoluble form which can be eliminated in the urine or feces. Furthermore, for these important liver processes to proceed effectively, many specific complex enzymes are required in proper proportion to be released at the correct moment. If the liver is properly nourished and is in a clean state, the pesticide will be eliminated from the body before it can exert its neuro or immune-toxic effect. Consider that like any machine, the human body requires regular cleaning to insure long and proper functioning. The organs and tissues which act as filters (liver, spleen, kidneys, lymphatics, mucous membranes, etc) must be purified and have any accumulated toxins removed to prevent the channels which carry life's quintessential substances from becoming impeded. The ancient Ayurvedic physicians knew that without such maintenance, bothersome mental and physical conditions were more likely to arise, which could then give rise to more advanced disease states and eventually premature mortality.

Although most reasonable individuals recognize the value in maintaining a clean internal physiology, modern medicine has yet to accept this idea as a central tenet of healthcare and has therefore provided no practical guidance for detoxification therapies. The result is that few of us

give the same care and attention to our internal organs and tissues that we confer on our vacuum cleaners, cars, or washing machines. However, recently more and more men and women are becoming aware of the dangers of living in environmentally toxic, overpopulated, and overstressed conditions. On a planetary scale there is an increasing awareness of the need to purify our minds and bodies, to remove toxins, to maintain a balanced lifestyle. Only in this way can we expect to remain vital, strong, and immune to disease. Panchakarma, the detoxification therapies of Ayurveda, may well be the most effective method of cleansing and rejuvenating the various cells, tissues and organs of the human physiology.

Panchakarma therapy is regarded as the means by which the body can once again reestablish its innate intelligence and regain the ability to naturally assimilate nutrients and eliminate wastes. The health of each and every individual depends on these processes. Panchakarma therapies are designed to effect the radical purification of the bodily tissues through the elimination of vitiated doshas, which are the causative agents of disease. Unlike many healthpromoting recommendations of Ayurveda, these are not selfadministered therapies. These procedures must be administered by specially-trained therapists in a definite sequence for a specified period of time. In addition, although Panchakarma is for the most part a delightful and comfortable therapy, there can be periods of discomfort associated with the profound release of toxins which does occur. It is therefore essential that the therapy be supervised by a knowledgeable expert who can recognize the signs of properly and improperly administered Panchakarma. Fortunately these signs were meticulously recorded by the ancient *vaidyas* (wise physicians) and can be learned by the dedicated student.

The ancient physicians were very clear and direct in their assessment of the importance of Panchakarma treatments in one's overall health care. It is considered important for everyone to regularly undergo these treatments regardless of one's state of health, with the exception of certain patients with absolute and relative contraindications to the treatments (which we will cover later on). The time to act and invest in health is now. One does not begin digging a well upon feeling thirsty. Nor is it prudent to wait until your car is already spewing thick, black smoke before bringing it to a mechanic for a tune-up. If one is in generally good health, Panchakarma will help *prevent* the accumulation of toxins, enhance your vital energies, and prevent the occurrence of subsequent disease. If suffering from diseases of either acute or chronic natures, it can assist the body in the removal of obstinate, stubborn waste products which have become toxic.

Thus the importance of Panchakarma is apparent even for people living under the best of circumstances. However, it becomes an even higher priority for individuals living in more stressful, polluted, and unnatural environments. Overworked and underrested members of our society often eat unsatisfactory meals in a rushed manner, get insufficient exercise, sit at sedentary jobs under artificial light, breath stale oxygendepleted air, and then watch hours of mindnumbing television, take synthetic medicines, and live surrounded by noise, electromagnetic fields, and harmful radiation far removed from nature. To further exacerbate our situation, we learn to suppress many of our natural bodily functions in order to assimilate politely into an unnatural society: coughing, sneezing, expelling intestinal gas, belching, yawning, eating, drinking, sleeping, sweating, urinating, and defecating. As members of society we give our tacit agreement to suppress these natural urges in public and therefore we eat according to the office schedule, drink insufficient water, yawn selfconsciously, sneeze while squeezing our noses, and

rush to visit the toilet only between meetings.

The unavoidable consequence of this lifestyle is the formation and bioaccumulation of toxic substances and residues in the physiology. They can take a myriad of forms including: senescent (dead) cells, mucous secretions, bacterial overgrowths, excessive fats and fatty acids, and many forms of toxins which are so unique that they defy classification in modern terms. You can be reasonably certain you suffer from toxicity if you are experiencing: headaches, joint pains, chronic inflammatory symptoms, recurrent respiratory infections, constipation, hemorrhoids, sinus congestion, psoriasis, acne, nonstructural low back pain, mood changes, depression, food allergies, ulcers, or generalized aches and pains. Panchakarma detoxification is perhaps the "missing link" to restoring optimum function of our cells and tissues. Whether undertaken to prevent or treat disease, most individuals who avail themselves of authentic panchakarma treatments will feel physically and mentally revitalized with a commensurate amelioration in symptoms of toxicity.