ABHYANGA: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Abhyanga is one of the consequential Ayurvedic procedures. On going through the ancient texts, it is evident that Abhyanga is being practiced since the dawn of civilization. Abhyanga has been indicated for both, the prevention and the cure of diseases. Ayurveda has meticulously depicted the technique of Abhyanga and its various benefits. Abhyanga has been included as a part of Dincharya (Daily regimen) as a health maintenance mean and as the treatment major for certain diseases. It is also a part of pre therapeutic procedures of Panchakarma as it imparts strength to the body to tolerate the weakness as a consequence of Shodhana and makes the easy elimination of Dosha. Present study deals with the review of various aspects of Abhyanga scripted in classics of Ayurveda.

KEYWORDS: Abhyanga, Dincharya, Dosha.

INTRODUCTION

Abhyanga therapy is one of the most important auxiliary medical maneuvers which reigned with dignity in the past and enjoyed esteem value in the compendiums of Ayurveda. It has again captured its central place amongst the way for healing, preventing diseases and promoting health. It is the oldest of all techniques for relieving pain and shaping the organs, regenerating the tissue and correcting all internal functions. It has origin in natural instincts of animals and handed over to conscious man with a mandate to improve as per possible to his own wisdom. In spite of all advancement in knowledge and complexes of techniques it retains its usefulness and significance even in steps for saving life.
Abhyanga has been mentioned as a regular procedure to be performed for maintenance of health and prevention of certain non-manifested and upcoming disorders.\[1\] It is a familiar procedure and has been practiced in various forms from early dawn of civilization. Similar kind of procedures have also been documented in the earliest ever texts of mankind, i.e. Rigveda, in various ways for prevention of the diseases. The healing procedure through the specific touch has been categorically presented and the defined outcome of the procedure through hands and digits has also shown its importance and impact in the clinical parlance.

The procedure has been continued for thousands of years and vivid description has been documented in Atharvaveda. The glimpse of the same is also found in some post-vedic texts like Šatpatha-brāhmaṇa, Purāṇa etc. The procedure was also familiar in the epic period and some references have been also found in contemporary epics. The topic and the procedure have been vividly portrayed from the different angles and variations of the procedure are also documented in lucid manner. So, from the Vedic era, the procedure has gone through various stages and phases of metamorphosis and finally the Ayurveda scholars have framed and designed a more rational and logical procedure in accordance with the nature and variance of Dosha whereas the other system like Siddha, Kālāri school and Marma school have taken the procedure in some different ways and adopted according to their principles of thought. Apart from the generalized Abhyanga, some local similar procedures have also been depicted. The main process is more or less similar.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES
1. Review of Abhyanga.
2. Conceptual understanding of Abhyanga from the Ayurvedic viewpoint.

MATERIAL AND METHODS
A thorough review on the procedure, brief classical techniques, clinical consequences of Abhyanga are discussed hereafter with contextual evidences by the help of following material – various classical Ayurvedic texts, e.g. Charaka Samhita, Shushruta Samhita etc. along with their commentaries. Relevant references were compiled, analyzed and reviewed as the method to get a thorough & in-depth understanding of the concept of Abhyanga.

AYURVEDIC REVIEW
In classics of Ayurveda, Abhyanga has been considered as external mode of administration of oil or unctuous substances, medicated or non-medicated, to the body by rubbing, aiming at
restoration of balance of *Dosha* by acting locally and systemically. Etymologically, the word *Abhyanga* means to smear or anoint and rubbing with unctuous substances, like oil etc. So, anointing the body with unctuous substances like oil, ghee etc. is called as *Abhyanga*.

**Clinical utility of Abhyanga**

*Abhyanga* therapy has been mentioned in all the classics of *Ayurveda* owing to its concern with the health in both the departments i.e. preventive and curative. The preventive aspect of *Abhyanga* has been mentioned in context of *Dinacharya* as it is recommended to be done daily in order to keep the healthy state of body intact.²⁷ The *Abhyanga* as a daily regimen has also been told to be immensely effective in for maintaining the proper sleep pattern.³ The importance of *Abhyanga* as a daily regimen has been shown by different metaphoric illustrations. The impact of regular *Abhyanga* on body is symbolically aphorized with gaining of potency and smoothness of a pitcher or dry leather by the application of oil. It becomes unsusceptible to *Vata* disorders and resistant to exertion and exhaustion.⁴

**Virtues of Abhyanga as a daily regimen**

1. *Jarahara*⁵ – It slows down and corrects ageing process. *Abhyanga* nourishes the *Dhatu* and increases their strength.
2. *Shramahara*⁶ – It helps a person to overcome fatigue caused by hard physical work.
3. *Vatahara*⁷ – It prevents and corrects disorders caused by affliction of the *Vata*. *Abhyanga* helps in the promotion and regulation of the proper function of *Vata*.
4. *Drishtiprasadakara*⁸ – It promotes eyesight. The diseases of the eye like *timira* and other diseases, which are caused due to ageing could be prevented and cured by *Abhyanga*.
5. *Pushitakara*⁹ – It helps in nourishment of the body. It nourishes all the seven *Dhatu* of the body.
6. *Ayushya*¹⁰ – It promotes longevity of an individual. The functions of the vital organs and tissues are improved and life span is promoted through *Abhyanga* therapy.
7. *Svapnakara*¹¹ – It helps the individual to get sleep. The *Abhyanga* is very useful to overcome sleeplessness and other mental ailments.
8. *Tvakkardhyakara*¹² – It promotes sturdiness of an individual. *Abhyanga* provides a passive form of exercise even for those who cannot perform active physical exercise because of debility and old age. Even for a normal healthy person, *Abhyanga* provides sturdiness of the body, which keeps him healthy and happy.
9. *Klesha-sahatva*\(^{13}\) – Because of the sturdiness due to *Abhyanga*, body becomes capable to tolerate the stress and strains of life.

10. *Abhigata-sahatva*\(^{14}\) – In the persons who always use Abhyanga therapy, trauma cannot cause as much trouble as in other individuals.

11. *Kapha-Vatanirodhana*\(^{15}\) – According to *Sushruta*, *Abhyanga* prevents both *Vata* and *Kapha* from getting vitiated.

12. *Varna-balaprad\(^{16}\) – Abhyanga* improves the color of the skin and gives the strength to a person.

The curative functions of *Abhyanga* is related to its impact on *Dosha* especially *Vata*.\(^{17}\) This word *Abhyanga* stands for the administration of oil through the process of rubbing and oil has been considered the best for pacifying the *Vata Dosha*.\(^{18}\) The advantage of *Abhyanga*, in the disorders caused by *Vata* vitiation, is also because of its application on the prime location of *Vata* i.e. Skin.\(^{19}\) *Abhyanga* therapy has been indicated as an auxiliary therapy and a part of other therapeutic procedures like *Shodhana-karma* in various disorders.

**Contraindications of Abhyanga**

*Abhyanga* has been considered highly significant in both the states of the body, healthy and diseased. But there are certain conditions in which it should not be done. As doing *Abhyanga* in such conditions causes *Agnimandya* which further worsens the disease condition. The list of such adverse conditions is as follows.

1. *Kapha* dominant diseases.\(^{20}\)

2. After *Vamana* or *Virecana*.\(^{21}\)

3. In the state of indigestion.\(^{22}\)

4. Persons having *Aam-Dosha*.\(^{23}\)

5. *Tarun-jvara* (Acute fever).\(^{24}\)

6. After *Niruha-basti* administration.\(^{25}\)

7. Diseases caused by excessive nutrition.\(^{26}\)

8. Women in menstrual phase.\(^{27}\)

**Abhyanga technique**

The technique of *Abhyanga* is not elaborated in the major classics of *Ayurveda*. However, with the advent of time commentators have tried their best to give rational, preclinical and clinical explanation of the methods of *Abhyanga* cited in classics. The classics are mainly concerned with the clinical aspect like drug used for *Abhyanga*, diseases in which *Abhyanga*
is indicated etc. First indication about the technique of Abhyanga is found in Rigveda in which Abhyanga is told to be done by hands and digits and the stroke or touch should be gentle. Here gentle touch should not be taken as the non-application of pressure and rubbing but it implies that these processes should be limited to a point that is easily tolerated by the individual.

**Time consideration for Abhyanga**

In Purana, certain days and months have been considered inappropriate for Abhyanga like in Acharadhyay of Agnipurana, on Shashthi, Ashtami, Chaturdashi days of a month and in Aashadha, Shravana, Bhadrapada, and Aashvina months, Abhyanga should not be done. Arunadatta has indicated that Abhyanga should be applied daily or at two days interval or three days interval.\(^{[28]}\) Hemadri has told to apply Abhyanga when a person is presented by Kshudha-vega.\(^{[29]}\)

**Duration of Abhyanga**

Dalhana has decoded the relation of time of Abhyanga with the nourishment of the seven tissues of the body. According to him, the Sneha (oil) used in Abhyanga reaches to the hair follicle in 300 Matra (65 sec, One Matra = 16/60 sec). It reaches to Tvacha (Skin), Rakta (Blood), Mansa (Muscular tissue), Meda (Adipose tissue), Asthi (Bone tissue) and Majja (Bone marrow) in 400 Matra (133 sec), 500 Matra (160 sec), 600 Matra (190 sec), 700 Matra (228 sec), 800 Matra (240 sec) and 900 Matra (285 sec) respectively.\(^{[30]}\) So, in accordance with these calculations for a particular part of the body, at least 3 minutes are needed to perform Abhyanga so that Sneha may penetrate the deepest tissue layer. One more reference about the duration of Abhyanga is found in Kaiyadeva-Nighantu. According to him, the maximum period for administration of Abhyanga in a day is five Muhurta. If it is done more than this period, it causes various ailments. So from the above discussion it is evident that the duration of Abhyanga ranges between 900 Matra (3 min) to 5 Muhurta (240 min).

**Direction of Abhyanga**

Abhyanga should be performed in Anulomagati\(^{[31]}\) (in the direction of hairs) for the proper absorption of the oil by follicles. Tiruk has also talked about the direction of Abhyanga according to the Dosha.
**Abhyanga in Practice**

The concept of *Abhyanga* is very much antiquated. It is one of the earliest forms of healing developed over years of constant observations and experiences. In modern era, the word *Abhyanga* is taken for massage but massage is a broad term. The idea of massage is concentrated on techniques of systemic rubbing and manipulation of body while *Abhyanga* precisely stands for massage with oil or some unctuous substance. Some other procedures similar to *Abhyanga* are also depicted in *Ayurveda* like *Udvtana*, *Utsadana* but the materials and technique used for massage are different and the outcomes are largely diverse. Massage is one of the most valuable of remedial measures. Almost every culture has employed massage including Egyptian, Greeks, Romans, Japanese, Chinese and Swedish etc. Cross-references and usage of massage are witnessed in Bible and practiced by Hypocrates, Galen, Pare and most famous physicians of western medicine.

The basis of *Abhyanga* is the touch and there are increasing medical evidences showing the great value of touch. There are various other sciences which work on the concept of precise and calculated techniques of touch like acupressure etc. Prime evidence of healing through *Abhyanga* is found in *Veda* which has been shown to have effect through touch therapy.

The present day practice of *Abhyanga* is the incorporation of various other methods of massage. The Swedish method of massage has categorized it according to the movements as following.

1. **Touch** – Sensation which is carried through brain.
2. **Stroke** – Touching by one or both palms along with slow movements.
3. **Friction** – Grasping of the part and moving it with little amount of pressure.
4. **Kneading** – Alternative compression of the tissue by grasping them against the underlined body surfaces.
5. **Vibration** – Fine vibratory or shaking movements communicated to the body through the hands.
6. **Percussion** – The movements or blows administered in various ways with varying degrees of force.
7. **Joint movements** – Both assisted and resisted movements are given.

Nowadays above methods of modern massage and others also as per need are incorporated with the classical *Abhyanga* procedure.
CONCLUSION

1. Abhyanga is an ancient Ayurvedic procedure which has proven its utility in both prevention and cure of diseases.

2. Various massage techniques in practice can be correlated with the classical Abhyanga therapy and can be incorporated in it as the underlying principle is same.

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