



Panchakarma in India

09/18/2008 2:24 pm [★ BOOKMARK](#) [RSS](#)



Blog contributor and tour leader Buzzy Gordon shares his journey to health

(The first installment in a series about one of the most effective detoxification programs ever devised: Ayurvedic medicine's Panchakarma, a powerful healing experience that consistently cures illnesses and conditions that defeat Western doctors.)

I first learned about Ayurveda at a weekend seminar sponsored by Chicken Soup for the Soul's Mark Victor Hansen. The speaker was Dr. Pankaj Naram, founder of the Ayushakti Clinic in Mumbai. It was an eye-opening presentation, and I arranged to go to his center for a 5-week detoxification regimen known as Panchakarma (literally, "five acts" of cleansing). It was a transformational experience. After the main purge, it was like being reborn: my eyes had a new, glowing brightness; my mood was elevated along with a new-found physical energy. The end results spoke for themselves: I was off my oral medications for diabetes and cholesterol, I had lost 22 pounds and never felt better.

I also learned a great deal about India's ancient, holistic system of medicine, Ayurveda (literally, the science of life). I observed Dr. Naram as he saw hundreds of patients a day, needing only a few seconds to diagnose their ills using pulse reading, an art practiced throughout the Orient, yet mastered by few. He prescribed herbal medicines that, while effective, carried none of the side effects that we are constantly warned about in allopathic (Western) medicine. I also saw him minister to patients with chronic illnesses, treating them with marma, the technology of pressure point medicine. Pulse diagnosis and marma were techniques that spread throughout Asia along with the expansion of Buddhism, which, of course, also originated in India; in China, marma became acupuncture.

Unfortunately, both pulse diagnosis and marma are dying medical arts, even though, thankfully, there are some who carry on the traditions. They are not even taught in Ayurvedic medical schools, in spite of the renaissance Ayurveda is enjoying after centuries of denigration – a lingering legacy of British colonialism, which preached the superiority of allopathic medicine over the "primitive, unscientific" practices of the Indian "natives." Fortunately, the knowledge of herbal pharmacology and body treatments is as vital as ever, and even undergoing validation as modern science verifies the findings of centuries of Ayurvedic insight.

Following the success of Panchakarma at Ayushakti, under the expert guidance of detox specialist Dr Rajeshri Mehta, I tried to maintain my regained level of good health by

adhering to an Ayurvedic diet and taking the herbal medicines I had brought back with me from Mumbai (diet is critical to the effectiveness of the medicinal herbs and maintenance of the all-important equilibrium of the forces in our bodies that determine our state of health). I did OK for a couple of months; but the temptations of Western abundance being what they are, the diet was the first to fall victim to the lure of forbidden foods. And it was not long before I was back to being dependent on the “quick fixes” offered by the big drug companies to control cholesterol and blood sugar, inter alia.

Two year later, I was ready – even overdue, I would say -- for another round of Panchakarma. In spite of the excellent results at Ayushakti, the traveler in me wanted a different experience. In particular, since the birthplace of Ayurveda as a practical medical system is in the south of the country, I wanted to try an “authentic” experience in the cradle of Ayurveda. Not unrelated to that urge was the desire to return to the beautiful state of Kerala, with its tasty masala dosas and fabled port city of Cochin (now Kochi, like Bombay is now Mumbai).

My research led me to a new Ayurvedic clinic, Ayurved, which promised “seamless integration of Ayurveda and allopathy” – the best of both worlds, so to speak. I was impressed by the intake procedure and got my wish to learn first-hand about the traditions of southern Ayurveda: the insistence on taking liquid medicines instead of tablets, the use of traditional wooden treatment tables instead of contemporary massage tables, and the like. Unfortunately, the doses of liquid medicine (kashayams) are very bitter; and the treatment tables, while beautiful, lack the comfortable padding of Ayushakti’s adoption of modern amenities.

My second encounter with Panchakarma yielded mixed results. The weight loss was more than satisfactory, and the blood work revealed undeniable improvements in the lab test results, both for glucose and lipids. But I had been spoiled by my first experience: there was no feeling of being “born again.” Perhaps that is a once-in-a-lifetime occurrence. Certainly, the fact that Ayurved was a relatively new operation with younger and less experienced physicians played a role. I also did not help matters by running around and exploring Cochin, when I was supposed to be taking it easy (although I did watch my diet, even outside the facility).

The medicines of southern Ayurveda proved much more difficult to contend with back in the U.S. than the pills of northern Ayurveda, and my slide back into pre-Panchakarma bad habits – and deteriorating health -- was all too fast. I needed to find the time -- at least a month, preferably five weeks, not including travel – and save up the money for a repeat performance. Again, it took exactly two years. The summer months are a good time anyway, because it is monsoon season in India’s western states; the rains have a cooling effect after the blistering month of May, not to mention that they dampen proclivities to overdo things by going sightseeing.

I found my inspiration in a PBS documentary about the Arya Vaidya Chikitsalayam and Research Institute (AVP) in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu. The producer, Washington Post journalist T.R. Reid, called AVP the “Mayo Clinic” of Ayurveda, since it has been chosen by both the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH) and the World Health Organization as their center for collaboration in evaluating Ayurveda as an effective “alternative” or “complementary” system of medicine. (In other words, the West sees Ayurveda as something at least worth checking out.)



I was able to block off 31 days of actual treatment time (just under the ideal of 35 days) and reserve a room in the hospital beginning August 15, 2008. The private rooms, with en suite Western toilets, looked perfectly adequate, and reasonably priced at just under \$10.00 per day (yes, that is for a private room in a top-notch hospital! of course, a host of other

charges will apply). The process was incredibly simple: I went to the website, sent them an email, and got an immediate confirmation. I did not even have to pay a deposit.

I knew, of course, that AVP was going to practice the Kerala brand of Ayurveda; I had watched Reid grimace in the film as he swallowed his daily kashayam. But if this place is arguably the best, it was the obvious choice. The fact that its gateway city is Kochi – a southern Indian hub for cheap flights from the Middle East, and only four hours from Coimbatore by train – was just icing on the cake.

NEXT UP: ARRIVAL – AND IMMEDIATE IMMERSION

A Detox Worth the Effort

09/18/2008 3:11 pm  [BOOKMARK](#)  [RSS](#)

Panchakarma: Settling In

by Buzzy Gordon, Blog contributor and Explore Asia tour leader

(The second installment in a series about one of the most effective detoxification programs ever devised: Ayurvedic medicine's Panchakarma, a powerful healing experience that consistently cures illnesses.)

While Coimbatore is a typically cacophonous Indian city, the medical compound reverberates with its own peculiar symphony: most of the courtyard and gardens wedged among the main hospital building, the conference hall, the pharmacy and the cafeteria is dominated by a sprawling Hindu temple, with its warren of anterooms, chapels and blossom-braiding workshops, where bells, drums, and conch shells sound at irregular intervals throughout the day and evening as accompaniment to the chanting of bare-chested priests flicking flower petals at idols in various states of undress. (At times, the drumming and clashing of mini-cymbals ratchet up to a frenzied rhythm.)

One can only imagine what goes through the minds of the Ivy League-trained physicians and researchers here on assignment to investigate the scientific underpinnings of Ayurveda, as they watch the half-naked priests trail the doctors on their rounds, delivering the remains of the flower offerings to patients on small squares of banana leaf anointed with dabs of sandalwood paste.

Initiation into Panchakarma

Like virtually every patient here, I am placed on a very bland diet of approximately 1,000 calories a day. The menu does not offer a great deal of variety; my selections are fresh papaya and milky oatmeal for breakfast; rice and stewed local vegetables for lunch; varied grains with an even more limited assortment of stewed vegetables for dinner. (I could have rice and vegetables for breakfast, too, if I want; I choose the monotony of the same menu every morning over the boredom of the same menu three times a day.) Dessert, an optional extra, can be a boiled apple, a steamed banana or a sectioned pomegranate; even a dusting of cinnamon for the apple or oatmeal is considered too spicy to handle. To drink, I am allowed only water and an occasional pomegranate juice, plus two mini-thermoses of ginger tea early in the morning and in the evening; tea or coffee is available with breakfast – but mysteriously, may not (or perhaps, since this is India, can not) be ordered with lunch or dinner. As in any strict Ayurvedic diet, no raw fruits or vegetables or salad are permitted. My previous Panchakarma experiences allowed more variety, and the pounds still melted away like hard ghee in the Indian sun.

I already feel like I'm losing weight. Diet is critical in Ayurveda, in regard to both particular

courses treatment and general health. As far as the individual is concerned, certain foods aggravate – or ameliorate – certain dosha imbalances; in general, moreover, the process of digestion is vital to a properly functioning organism. The theory is that whatever is ingested must either be digested – the nutrients broken down and assimilated into the cells – or, if it is not useful, excreted. Whatever is not properly absorbed or eliminated builds up in the system as "aam", a toxic substance that, like a rejected suitor who will not go away, hangs around and causes all sorts of mischief, in the forms of disease and illness. For this reason, in addition to eating the right foods, proper digestion hygiene should be followed: beverages should always be tepid, never refrigerated, chilled or iced (cold liquid douses the thermodynamics of digestions); any drinking should take place before or after the meal, not during; and the stomach should be never be more than half-full with soupy or stewed solid food (the process of cooking gives the digestive system a head start), and one-quarter full of liquid, leaving plenty of room for the body to digest its fuel.

Decoctions and timings

My daily herbal medicines consist of foul-looking brown concoctions I must drink at very non-irregular intervals: 6 o'clock sharp morning and evening, plus a different brew at bedtime. They taste bitter, but not enough to make one gag or even require more than a plain glass of water to wash it down with. As the course of treatment intensifies, more unpalatable medicines will be added: doses at 10 am, 3 pm, after lunch, after dinner and at bedtime.

NEXT: THERAPEUTIC MASSAGE

Therapeutic Massage in India

10/01/2008 8:33 am



The Good, the Bad and the Oily

Contributed by Buzzy Gordon, Explore Asia tour leader and travel writer

The third installment in a series about one of the most effective detoxification programs ever devised: Ayurvedic medicine's Panchakarma, a powerful healing experience that consistently cures illnesses and conditions that defeat Western doctors.

I have checked into the hospital at a time when my psoriasis shows red patches and mild dandruff-like flaking on my arms, legs and torso. Ordinarily, the disease is actually kept under complete control by means of very expensive injections; but I had just recently switched from one biologic to another, and a severe outbreak that had afflicted me during the transition has not yet disappeared.

My daily treatment for week one, known as abhyangam, takes place under the watchful gaze of a portrait of Dhanwanthari, the Hindu god of healing, whose statue in the courtyard stands guard over the in-patient hospital's entrance. Abhyangam entails smearing me for 45 minutes with a soupy blend of medicinal herbs mixed into a base of coconut oil and heated in a wok over a butane flame right in front of me – like a chef would prepare crepes suzettes tableside, except my table is a "patti," a traditional Ayurvedic treatment platform roughly hewn from the wood of the neem tree (the bark contains a natural germicide). The surface is smooth but hard – no padding, like on the treatment tables at the Ayushakti Clinic in Mumbai.

I am fortunate that my therapist, Shankar, is skilled and adept. The good ones have a soothing touch. Others can be a bit rougher, applying pressure more akin to Swedish massage; this is OK when it comes to some muscle groups, but is hard on the stomach, for example. Fortunately, the therapists are responsive to your desired comfort level, and the physicians good about honoring requests for particular therapists.

After having gently worked the oil into my body, Shankar seats me on a stool and washes off the oily residue with a gooey, brown detergent freshly created by mixing a vegetable-based powder with water; he applies it manually all over my body (genitalia excepted) and scalp (my hair has been cut fairly short), and then rinses me by dipping a large plastic cup into a large plastic bucket of hot water and pouring it over my limbs, torso and head. (It took me a few times, as I suppose it might many Americans, to become accustomed to being bathed by a stranger; my initiation had come in 2006, at AyurVaid.)

The remarkable thing is, after just one application, all traces of redness and flaking were gone from both my forearms. Itching, which was negligible before, was non-existent after. Hours later, some faint redness and mild flaking returned. But I feel confident that repeated applications will accomplish even more – even though the primary purpose of abhyangam is not to treat my skin condition: it is to lubricate and condition my body so that it will be ready to absorb the massive quantities of oil that will be used in phase two of my prescribed course of treatments.

An important errand Since scraping the tongue clean of its bacteria-laden coating every morning is a recommended Ayurvedic practice, I was hoping a tongue cleaner might be provided. No such luck, but also no big deal; I always buy new ones in India anyway. I head out of the compound to the nearest shop and purchase a package of Health Star brand's "Good Morning" plastic tongue scrapers; they come two for a quarter in a pack that also contains two FREE plastic toothpicks. The label assures me that "Tongue cleaning protects 1. halitosis 2. gingivitis (sic) and plaque 3. unaestheticism (sic) (stain)." It's obviously one of the greatest oral hygiene bargains around.

Meeting my new neighbors is one of the pleasures of settling into my new quarters. There are a number of repeat patients: B.K., the successful importer/exporter from Mumbai (Bombay), here for the third year in a row, after AVP successfully treated his kidney condition that his allopathic (Western medicine) physicians had said was irreversible; Vijaya, all the way from Calgary (Canada), who finds the best relief from her arthritis comes from her annual treatments; Helga, from Munich (Germany), here for the third time, as she keeps osteoporosis at bay.

They clue me in on the routine of the place. Laundry will be collected once a day (four articles of clothing per day, max) and returned 24 hours later (ironing extra); my medical chart will be collected once a day for the data to be entered into the computer; and most importantly, I can order 24-hour broadband Internet service for my room -- at a cost of "50 bucks a day" (I am relieved to learn that bucks is also slang for rupees, such that 50 of them comes out to about \$1.15).

Incredible but true In the evening, we gather on the verandah overlooking the gardens to chat and get acquainted. We say goodbye to the departing Krishna, a stroke victim who had come to AVP a month previously shuffling his feet, with a dangling left arm that would not bend and a hand whose fist would not unclench. Now, he walks lifting his feet high, the fingers of his hand splayed normally. His smiling wife cannot contain her delight. Still, tonight he's grumbling about his discharge orders. "I don't understand why the doctors won't let me eat potatoes for the next six months," he complains.

The young Dr. Sarin is spotted in the courtyard and summoned. "He is one of the

communicative doctors," B.K. tells me. Apparently, many of them are not. But he and Dr. Somit -- both brilliant, B.K. assures me -- are always willing and eager to clue patients in.

Sure enough, the enthusiastic Dr. S. launches into a discourse about the properties of the foods that Krishna should avoid as he continues to heal. First, he explains things in terms of the Ayurvedic doshas (the three principal bodily humors) that are affected by the foods we eat; then, seamlessly, and to my utter amazement, he translates it all into the anatomic terms familiar to conventional medicine, talking about myelin sheaths and the like. He talks so fast I cannot absorb it all – perhaps also because my jaw has dropped open in wonder. How and where did this guy learn so much? And how did all this knowledge stay so secretly hidden away in deepest, darkest India, when stroke patients all over the “developed” world struggle for months in agonizing physical therapy to make the kind of progress Krishna achieved in mere days?

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Buzzy will be leading a small group to on a small group holistic (mind-body-spirit) wellness tour to Southern India scheduled summer of 2009

For more information, contact

Nancy Harkrider, wellness@exploreasia.net

Buzzy Gordon buzzygo@gmail.com

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