

SHIRODHARA – THE STRESS MANAGEMENT THERAPY OF AYURVEDA

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ABSTRACT

Lifestyle of the modern era leads to poor health in many ways. These lifestyle changes vitiate *doshas* and ultimately cause various diseases. Purification therapy is a unique feature of Ayurveda involving the complete cleansing of the body and thereby eliminating vitiated *doshas*. *Shirodhara* is one such purificating and rejuvenating therapy. The word *Shirodhara* breaks down into two ideas: *Shiro*, meaning head, and *dhara* which mean flow. Together they form a concept that aims to bring physical and emotional balance by rejuvenating the spirit and preserving health by relieving stress. *Shirodhara* works primarily on the “*Manomaya Kosha* “ as it is referred to in Ayurveda. It is traditionally used to calm the nerves, harmonize *vata* constitutions, restore the nerves, release stored emotions and free the mind from stress. In Ayurveda it is considered an important tool in the pursuit of higher states of consciousness.

Keywords: *Shirodhara*, stress, purification, rejuvenation

INTRODUCTION

Along with the economic advancement, man is going far away from Nature, and in order to find an honorable place in the society, he is often exposed to physical fatigue and mental tension. This stressful living is the primary culprit responsible for many of the present day maladies of psycho-neurotic nature. According to ayurveda, the function of the mind and nerves is dependent upon *vayu* or *vata*. All the functions of the body, according to ayurveda are controlled by three elements which in ayurvedic parlance are called *doshas*. *Shirodhara* is a clas-

sical and a well-established ayurvedic procedure of slowly and steadily dripping medicated oil or other liquids on the forehead. The word *shiro* means head and the word *dhara* means stream. This procedure induces a relaxed state of awareness that results in a dynamic psycho-somatic balance. *Shirodhara* is one of the most powerful treatments to relieve *Vata* (wind) in the mind. Preoccupied with swarming thoughts, the mind has a difficult time slowing down. This can lead to inability to handle stress, creating nervousness, anxiety, depression, insomnia, fa-

tigue, psychological disorders, and more¹. *Shirodhara* is the specific treatment for these disorders and any other disorder that is stress related.

SHIRODHARA: CLASSICAL DESCRIPTION AND TYPES

Shirodhara is a titillating form of *snehana* treatment, whereby the *Taila* or therapeutic substance methodically drips along a course thread onto the forehead. A metal or clay vessel, the *dharapatra*, is suspended directly above the forehead. This treatment involves pouring a stream of *Taila* over the patient's forehead. Most commonly medicated *Tiltaila* is used for this treatment. Traditionally, specifically prepared *Shastrayukta tailas*, milk, or buttermilk are used. The *taila* or other fluid is poured into the pot, with which then seeps through a hole in the bottom of the pot and slides down a 4-inch-long thread, half of which hangs through the hole. The drops of *taila* from the thread drip directly onto the area of *SringatakaMarma*, or center of the forehead. An ancient technique, *Shirodhara* is meant to be maintained at a certain rhythmic flow while awakening the *Marmasthana*. Vast and miraculous healing occurs when this technique is performed to perfection. The rhythm of the *taila* trickling onto the *SringatakaMarma*, which is the seat of our cognitive vision, evokes deep cognitive memories. Through the arousal of these memories, bodily tissues are transformed and good health is restored. Before *Shirodhara* is administered, the preliminary procedure of *abhyanga* is performed. A soporific treat, *Shirodhara* soothes and invigorates the senses as well as the mind. A total state of wellness is induced in the process. There are several kinds of *dhara* techniques, depending on the medium for dripping. For example, *takradhara* uses *ta-*

kra that is prepared with the curd of cow's milk. *Kshiradhara* uses cow's milk mixed with some medicinal herbs such as *bala* (*Sidacordifolia*) *orsatavari* (*Asparagus rasemosus*) or *musta* (*Cyperusrotundus*). *Tailadhara* uses medicated *taila* mixed with cow's milk, water, herbs and *tiltaila*.

Different liquids are used depending on the conditions being treated. Commonly used liquids include water, various *tailas*, buttermilk, or coconut water. First, the *taila* stream or *dhara* should be thick and heavy. Second, the *taila* stream should be continuous so that if the treatment needs to last an hour, it can be provided. Third, the *taila* needs to be warmed and needs to be maintained just above body temperature at all times. The fourth component is that the stream needs to be moveable and not stationary.

Generally, *tilataila* processed with various medicinal herbs is used for *Shirodhara*. However, milk and buttermilk processed with herbs are also used in this treatment depending on the condition.

INDICATIONS

Patients of Insomnia with mild hypertension, mild depression and anxiety disorders without any complications of any other diseases can be treated optimally with *Shirodhara*. *Shirodhara* is suitable for patients suffering from *Shiroroga*, metabolic disorders, and the different kinds of mental diseases described in Ayurveda. It has long been conducted to combat insomnia, headache, anxiety neurosis, depression, schizophrenia, motor-neurosis, depression, schizophrenia, motor-neuron disease, hypertension, and several kinds of psychosis. *Shirodhara* has been shown to be effective in attention deficit/hyperactively disorder in children, hyperten-

sion, menopause, cerebral ataxia, general anxiety disorder, headache, and insomnia.⁵

Vata Disorders: prickling pain in the head; loss of hair; loss of hearing; fatigue and mental exhaustion; grayish coating on the tongue; dryness of face and scalp; constipation.

Pitta Disorders: burning sensation in head and body; ulcerated or inflammatory conditions of the head; pharyngitis; conjunctivitis; excess sweating; dimness of vision; blood disorders; hemorrhage; jaundice; herpes; yellowish coating on the tongue; greenish or yellowish coloring of urine and faeces.

Kapha Disorders: excessive sleep; heaviness of body; indigestion; mucus; obesity; weak digestion; white coating on the tongue; white urine and faeces; loss of appetite; repulsion for food; anorexia. In addition to relieving the disorders listed above, this treatment has the added effect of awakening the third eye, invigorating the body and mind, and stimulating cognitive memories.

EFFECTS OF SHIRODHARA

The neurophysiological mechanism of the effects of *Shirodhara* on the psychophysiological changes may be related to the tactile stimulation of the skin or hair follicles in-

MECHANISM

nervated by the first branch of the trigeminal nerves. The impulses would be transmitted to the thalamus through the principal nucleus and forward to the cerebral cortex (somato-sensory field) or limbic system. While most Ayurvedic therapies have their impact on the physical and energy sheaths of the subtle body system, *Shirodhara* most effectively purifies the mental sheath, where patterns of behavior (*vasanas*) and emotional traumas can distract the mind from its' role in supporting good health and spiritual growth. When during a therapy the patient is taken into a deep, meditative state of silence, the basal metabolic rate is significantly lowered, and with successive treatment, it is lowered even more. If the body were a lake, it would become totally calm and crystal clear. In this state the body experiences itself more profoundly as a unified field of consciousness rather than thousands of physical parts. In this procedure the metabolic rate drops, and the brain waves become slow and coherent. The state of calm achieved with *Shirodhara* is unparalleled by other relaxation techniques, and it brings the nervous system into the depths of inner silence.

The medicated liquid that is poured from a height of 4 *angula* on the forehead produces electromagnetic waves.

Strikes on the surface of the skin and electromagnetic waves are created and transferred to the cerebral cortex and hypothalamus.

Hypothalamus acts as the centre of stimulation and inhibition centre in body hence stimulating effect created on the hypothalamus.

It results in the secretion of various neurotransmitters like epinephrine, serotonin, dopamine, etc.,²

Hypothalamus controls the function of the pituitary gland, which is known as the master gland of our body. Pituitary gland in turn, controls all the systems of body.

DISCUSSION

A standardized *Shirodhara* leads to a state of alert calmness similar to the relaxation response observed in meditation. The clinical benefits observed with *Shirodhara* in anxiety neurosis, hypertension, and stress aggravation due to chronic degenerative diseases could be mediated through these adaptive physiological effects.³ A total feeling of wellness, mental clarity, and comprehension is experienced in this process. *Shirodhara* stimulates the pineal gland which produces the hormone melatonin. Melatonin regulates the wake and sleep cycles of the body. In the procedure of *Shirodhara*, a particular pressure and vibration is created over the forehead. The vibration is amplified by the hollow sinus present in the frontal bone. The vibration is then transmitted inwards through the fluid medium of cerebrospinal fluid (CSF). This vibration along with little temperature may activate the functions of thalamus and the basal fore brain which then brings the amount of serotonin and catecholamine to the normal stage inducing the sleep. The procedure of *Shirodhara* brings the *SanjnavahaSrotas* in peaceful state of rest which helps in inducing sleep. The process of *Shirodhara* also produces a meditation effect which helps to overcome the complaint of insomnia. The method *Shirodhara* produces almost similar effects as that of *Yoganidra* technique in yogic science.

CONCLUSION

Now a days, *Shirodhara* is becoming popular, because of its wonderful effects like relieving fatigue and promoting relaxation. As *taila* is poured on the forehead, the nervous system is deeply stilled. The brain waves slow down and become coherent. Once the brain is quieted, the *pranavaha* and *manovahasrotas*

begin to transport *prana*, oxygen, and other necessary nutrients to the brain. When the brain is quieted and the *srotas* are activated, the cerebral circulation is greatly improved, and access to these mood stabilizing receptors is enhanced. The result is better brain function, mood stability, and improved stress handling ability. *Shirodhara* may be the oldest, but is the most skillful healing technique that manipulates cerebral circulation, cerebral function, and the state of consciousness. It may provide a new tool and new knowledge for modern brain research into consciousness. Furthermore, it may open new paradigms for exploring what we refer to as spiritual biotechnology.

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