

By now, even the uninitiated know that ayurveda isn't some hocus-pocus ritual left over from a pre-modern-medicine world. The 6,000-year-old Indian science is in fact the very definition of holistic care. And while that term itself can sound kind of New Agey, it means essentially the same thing any U.S. doctor might tell you: Eat well, exercise, get enough sleep, reduce stress. The main difference lies in the practice: Unlike visiting your GP, which usually occurs when you're feeling unwell, visits with an ayurvedic therapist should be somewhat regular, when you're feeling good. It's about maintenance.

"It is nothing more than a way of life," explains Dr. Naina Marballi, founder of **Ayurveda's Beauty Care**. "When you know about yourself, what your body type is and your mind type, then it's easy to derive what you need from nature to prevent illness and maintain health. To keep yourself in balance."

The "types" Marballi refers to are known as *doshas*, of which there are three (*vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*), and they're derived from the five elements: space, air, fire, water and earth. A constitutional analysis will reveal your body/mind type, and you can stay healthy by adopting a lifestyle that best suits your constitution.

Those guidelines include everything from what and when to eat and when to wake up and go to sleep, to what sort of exercise is right and what kind of spa therapies are most beneficial. According to **Chopra Center's** Thara Kodandaramachandra, a person such as myself, with a *vata* body (lots of air and space) and a *pitta* mind (fire), should focus on a diet that favors sweet, bitter and astringent tastes. I should awaken by 6am and go to bed by 9:30pm (eating lunch no later than 1pm), and participate in low-impact sports, such as swimming. And like all the specialists I visited, Kodandaramachandra prescribed a regimen of daily head-to-toe self-massages.

Massage is an integral part of ayurveda. As Dr. Marballi explains: "Your skin is not only your largest organ, but it is the export/import source for your body. It guards against the outside environment—whether that's pollution or noise—and it's a reflection of what's happening inside, of everything from your digestive system to your emotions. Puffy eyes, for example, can signal kidneys not performing well." She continues: "And hormonal imbalance leads to breaking out around the chin and jawline."

Understanding and treating these basic issues is a point of departure between ayurveda and traditional spa therapies. Get all the facials you want, but if your hormones are imbalanced your acne will continue. Still, you can benefit from ayurvedic treatments without subscribing to the lifestyle. Just expect some differences.

"I have people come and say they like ayurvedic massages and facials because they

love the essential oils," says **FineLiving New York's** Nisha Saini. "But they haven't had true ayurveda; in true ayurveda, the oil really has to be flowing." Indeed, I discovered that the massage is a rather messy affair, so be prepared to get drippy. And if you're looking for a rigorous deep-tissue rubdown, know that those are typically reserved for more fleshy *kapha* types; most ayurvedic massage—or *abhyanga*—consists of long, gentle strokes that serve more to stimulate circulation and release toxins than to knead knotted muscles.

Other unique therapies include *basti*, in which an herbal-powder dough is placed on the problem area and formed into a small volcano shape (common forms are *kati*, for the lower back, *uro*, for the chest and *netra*, for the eyes). Warm essential oil is then poured into the reservoir, releasing tension and nourishing the nervous system. "With so many people spending long hours in front of the computer, I have a lot of clients asking for *netra basti* these days," Saini says.

Perhaps the best-known treatment is *shirodhara*, in which warm oil is poured over the forehead, or third eye. If getting the body and mind in tune is its intention, the *shirodhara* I experienced at Body Essentials struck the right chord about halfway through, when I felt a vibration run from my head through my toes, as though I were the embodiment of the perfect om. Later, I was impressed by an energy level I hadn't felt in months and by a clarity in my eyes, the likes of which I can't remember.

My skepticism wants to credit my revitalization to the power of suggestion resulting from research and interviews—and that everyone feels better after a massage. What has me leaning toward belief, however, is what transpired during my constitutional analyses with specialists Marballi and Kodandaramachandra—both of whom have the six years of training required to become an ayurvedic physician. After each read my pulse, they offered the same diagnosis about my physical state, even pinpointing the same health issues—concerns I hadn't revealed to them. Furthermore, their suggestions for changes to my lifestyle were almost identical.

I'll follow their guidelines for the next month or so to see what sort of difference they make. If I see the intended results, I'll be a convert. If not, I'll at least be healthier—which is really the goal of ayurveda after all.

- **Ayurveda's Beauty Care**, 99 University Pl between 11th and 12th Sts (212-529-3300)
- **Body Essentials**, 16 E 40th St between Fifth and Madison Aves, second floor (212-465-2220)
- **Chopra Center at Dream**, 1710 Broadway at 54th St (212-246-7600)
- **FineLiving New York Ayurveda**, 154 W 14th St at Seventh Ave, fourth floor (212-616-4127)

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Events will take place in the Marigold Theater (a huge tent situated on the store's mezzanine), including guided meditation most weekend mornings, along with demonstrations of sari-making and indigenous cuisine. Both Indian spa Shobha and the Chopra Center (at the temporary **ABC Om Healing & Beauty Spa**) will offer ayurvedic therapies, and special antiques, dieties, jewelry and commissioned furniture will be for sale. A portion of the proceeds will benefit the Clinton Foundation's HIV programs, among others.

"We are creating a new paradigm in retail that shows it's also about healing and education," explains Paulette Cole, ABC Home's CEO. "India is very much a part of who we are; there's so much to be done there. This event is really a launchpad."—EB 888 Broadway at 19th St (212-473-3000, abchome.com).

Check Seek each week for highlights of Gateway to India.

For more on the writer's constitutional analysis and follow-up, go to timeoutnewyork.com.