



MASSAGING THE MIND

Shirodhara, a steady stream of liquid poured across the forehead, is a subtle Ayurvedic therapy that relaxes the body and cleanses the mind.

WORDS / CAROLINE ROBERTSON

Wouldn't it be wonderful if you could wash stress away like sweat in the shower? Shirodhara's warm waterfall over the forehead smooths lines and soothes the brain back to balance. Try turning off tension by turning on to shirodhara for relaxation and rejuvenation.

SERENE STREAM

Remember how heavenly it feels to have your hair rinsed at the hairdressers? Ayurvedic practitioners in India have used shirodhara — Sanskrit for head (*shiro*) and stream (*dhara*) — for centuries to lull patients into serenity.

This hypnotic healing therapy is performed slightly differently according to each person's needs and the practitioner's approach. However, it always involves lying comfortably on one's back while a continuous stream of liquid is poured over the forehead to overflow through the scalp. This dissolves depression, stress, anxiety, fatigue, brain fog, glandular imbalances and nervous system issues.

The duration and substance used is adjusted according to the individual. Typically, warm herbalised oil is applied, but other options are milk, buttermilk, coconut milk, coconut water and water. A usual course is 60 minutes, preferably

performed for a consecutive three days minimum, but for some conditions it can be continued for 14 days with each session lasting up to 90 minutes. One may lie on a traditional wooden *droni* table or a massage table. The fluid flows from centimetres above the forehead, the stream either swinging left to right like a pendulum or staying still over the "third eye".

Shirodhara sounds like a strange water torture to some, but it's really relaxing and healing on the physical and subtle sphere. The stroking sensation gently surrounds you in a blissful bubble, tuning your intuition and higher purpose. Dripping over the *ajna* chakra,

a major *marma*, or meridian, shirodhara opens and cleanses this energy vortex and optimises its psychosomatic functions. The *ajna* activates the pineal and pituitary glands. These master glands harmonise all hormones including melatonin for sleep, growth hormone to thrive, thyroid hormones for balance, adrenal secretions for stress and sex hormones for fertility and more.

It caresses the crown chakra over the cranium, soaking into the scalp through the blood-brain barrier to balance the brain and nervous system. This can resolve deep-seated disturbances by aligning the right and left brain hemispheres and clearing impressions. As Ayurvedic physician Rama Prasad explains, "Shirodhara is a simple solution to stress, exhaustion and emotional issues. It makes us mentally receptive to inner wisdom, which the body then responds to without resistance. It cleanses the mind as naturally as a river sweeps silt from a ravine."

ENTERING THE ZEN ZONE

Abhishekam, the ceremonial version of shirodhara, is soothing to see. During festivals, delighted devotees bathe their beloved deities in liquid love of milk, honey or ghee. Pouring offerings over the divinity's head is akin to the releasing ritual of shirodhara. It's reminiscent of bathing a baby who is restless at the start and totally tranquil by the end.

Initially in shirodhara, the mind remains alert to the curious new feeling. Then, as you become accustomed to the stimulation, sedation ensues and buried baggage slowly surfaces. Lapping liquid peels away layers of thought, revealing unconscious impressions. Surrendering to the healing baptism, you enter a dreamy alpha brainwave haze where thoughts bubble up and burst like effervescent insights. People tend to emerge reborn from the amniotic waters with sparkling perception and revived energy.

The relaxation response induced by shirodhara is similar to a meditative state. Studies have shown it stabilises blood pressure, lowers heart rate, increases alpha brainwave coherence, reduces anxiety and alleviates insomnia. Repeating a shirodhara course at least annually reinforces these effects.

An Ayurvedic practitioner tailors the treatment for you before commencing therapy by completing a preliminary consultation, assessing

you and explaining the protocol. After investigating your tissues, elements, body systems, past conditions and mental disposition, the ideal therapy is devised for the patient's needs. Sometimes a full-body, head or foot massage is prescribed before the actual shirodhara. A full-body waterfall or *deha-dhara* may also be recommended as a powerful adjunct to shirodhara.

It's best not to eat one hour before a treatment and to avoid rushing, stress or exertion after shirodhara. Allow the serenity to sink in and integrate into your wakeful awareness rather than launch back into overload. Be prepared to have wet hair and a relaxed yet refreshed outlook.

IS SHIRODHARA FOR YOU?

Renowned Ayurvedic doctor Robert Svoboda once joked that we need roadside shirodhara stalls to cleanse stress just as we have car washes to remove dirt. Shirodhara is a blessing for those who suffer everyday pressures or serious imbalances. Yet we all gain from regular realignment and reintegration. As my client Sarah Webber shared, "Shirodhara has a profoundly grounding effect on me. It takes me to a quiet space where I experience my true self and emerge with crystal clarity."

Everyone is happier and healthier when their soul is singing, their mind is peaceful and their body is performing at its peak. Shirodhara supports this state as it ignites your intuition, immunity, energy and internal balance. It lubricates the endocrine and nervous systems so you run like a well-oiled machine.

Shirodhara is suitable for almost everyone. However, it's not advised for those with a cold, fever, very low blood pressure or open skin on their scalp. It's also not advised during the first trimester of pregnancy.

Shirodhara dissolves stress in general but has also been prescribed to help the following specific disorders for thousands of years:

- *Vata* (air and ether) imbalances, for example insecurity, fear, nervous system strain, spaciness, sudden pain, nerve problems, depleted bones and poor digestion
- *Pitta* (fire and water) imbalances can benefit from a cooling, calming session to reduce anger, frustration, burning pains, inflammation and acidity
- Brain fog from mental strain, shiftwork or sleep deprivation
- Post traumatic stress disorder
- Insomnia

- Menopausal imbalances such as hot flushes, weight gain and osteoporosis
- Psychiatric disorders such as schizophrenia, paranoia, bipolar, depression and anxiety neurosis
- Skin conditions including psoriasis and eczema
- Head pain such as headache, migraine, sinusitis, eye pain and neck pain
- Jet lag
- Hypertension
- Memory loss
- Alzheimer's and dementia
- Tinnitus
- Dizziness
- Dandruff
- Hair loss
- Epilepsy
- Infertility
- Low immunity
- Residual effects from head injuries such as concussion
- Pain such as from arthritis, sciatica, muscular tension, tendonitis or spasm
- Chronic fatigue
- ADD and ADHD
- Temporomandibular joint disorders
- Poor concentration and lost direction
- Parkinson's, muscular dystrophy, fibromyalgia and multiple sclerosis
- Ménière's disease
- Facial palsy, paralysis and ptosis (drooping) of the eyelids
- Improve senses of hearing, sight, smell and taste
- Soften worry lines
- Stimulate the sixth and seventh chakras, which regulate respiration
- Increase lucid dreaming
- Clear any traumatic or unpleasant memories

WHAT TO EXPECT

So how do you take a dip in this pure shirodhara spring? Previously only available in India, this therapy is now offered by most Ayurvedic doctors and body therapists worldwide. Some spas are adding it to their menu under exotic names such as Aveda's "Himalayan rejuvenation treatment".

The experience varies according to the place, with some standard procedures. Generally, you remain fully clothed or wear a gown, leaving the décolletage uncovered and removing earrings and glasses. Your makeup is cleansed and hair placed within the catchment headrest in either two pigtailed or resting inside the lip. Eye patches or an eye mask may be placed over the eyes.

A dimly lit, quiet room sets a tranquil mood. Essential oils or

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MIND SHIRODHARA

incense may be burnt to induce deeper sedation. While you're cocooned in a warm cover, the practitioner creates a safe and sacred space for you in their unique way. Some therapists centre themselves and you with a mantra, breathing or brief guided meditation.

Once settled into a comfortable position, you're encouraged to stay still, silent and aware of any arising thoughts or sensations. It's best to rest for at least 15 minutes after a shirodhara session and avoid excessive mental or physical activity for a few hours following. You can wash oil or liquid from your hair by applying shampoo directly to your tresses then rinsing off in warm water.

YOUR SHIRODHARA SYSTEM

Shirodhara systems are an appealing addition to health clinics and yoga/meditation centres. They attract more clients, increase income and can be customised to each centre. An easy option is the simple self-service automated shirodhara system developed by Swiss doctor Bertrand Martin, who specialises in psychiatry, yoga and Ayurveda. His light, portable, temperature- and flow-controlled shirodhara machine makes it easy to apply shirodhara on yourself or others.

Dr Rama Prasad finds that many patients with chronic conditions benefit from purchasing one of Martin's devices. "I've used different shirodhara equipment over 20 years but this is by far the quietest, cleanest and most seamless shirodhara system I've utilised," he says. "It's especially useful for those wanting to get or give regular treatments in the convenience of their own homes."

Alternatively, you can arrange your own shirodhara system. Authentic shirodhara equipment can be a stunning showpiece: a hand-carved wooden table, handspun valved brass pot and copper inlaid wooden stand are like museum masterpieces. Yet, while jackfruit or neem wood and copper have their own medicinal properties, these are not the cheapest or lightest options. You can set up a modern, makeshift and inexpensive shirodhara spa with the following items:

1. A warm, dimly lit, quiet and preferably uncarpeted room
2. Massage table
3. Large modified photographic tray with a hole drilled on one side and a "U" cut out of one side, which sits under the recipient's neck. Attach this to the table with strong double-sided sticky tape on



A copper vessel used for shirodhara.

WHAT LIQUID TO CHOOSE?

Selecting a suitable solution is an important factor of successful shirodhara. The other essential aspects are a soothing environment, the correct temperature for the liquid and a rhythmic movement.

Herbalised Ayurvedic oils are most commonly used in shirodhara, as they are said to penetrate the crown fontanelle and permeate the seven skin layers within 10 minutes. They can then cross over the blood-brain barrier and directly nourish the nervous system. Ayurvedic oils contain herbs that are antioxidant, anti-ageing and purifying. The temperature should be around 20°C.

Ayurvedic doctor Rama Prasad recommends the following herbs for shirodhara: "*Dhanwantharam* for bone or brain problems, *ksheerabala* for inflammation, *maha-narayana* for nervous system disorders, *pinda* for inflamed pains and *sahacharadi* to cool and ground." You may also add essential oils such as lavender to relax, ylang ylang to balance, rose to uplift and sandalwood to enhance spiritual connection.

Simple warm water also has a relaxing effect, purely from the sensation. Coconut water is useful when the head is overheated, milk is calming and buttermilk assists dermatitis, dandruff and psoriasis.

a slight slant, so that the liquid flows out with gravity.

4. 2–3L stainless-steel bowl with a 1cm-radius hole drilled in the bottom and three holes drilled around the edges, to tie three strings for attaching to the roof or a stand.
5. 10 thick cotton threads 6 inches long, tied together on one end to a thickness that can easily run through the hole at the bottom of the stainless-steel vessel.

The flow is controlled by increasing or decreasing the number of threads. The knot should be inside the bowl, suspended 1–2 inches above the bottom hole with the help of a curved plastic lid or stick. Traditionally, this is done with a carved coconut shell.

6. A beaked, flat-bottomed saucepan sitting on a small electric stove with a temperature regulator, to collect the oil pouring out the hole from the tray at the edge of the table.

7. Another beaked, flat-bottomed saucepan to rapidly swap over onto the burner when the oil in the bowl is empty and needs to be refilled with heated oil.

8. 2L of suitable liquid. This may be oil, milk, coconut milk, buttermilk or coconut water.

9. An assistant who will collect the oil from the heater, place another saucepan in its place and pour the oil into the overhanging bowl.

10. Lots of towels for wiping the recipient's hair and face.

SHIRODHARA PROCEDURE

Once the recipient is comfortably lying down, the therapist holds the overhanging bowl away from the recipient's head by the rim with one hand and plugs the hole at the bottom with one finger. The assistant pours warm liquid into the bowl and the therapist places it around 3 inches away from the forehead. They then release the finger and allow a continuous stream to flow over the forehead. They may move it from temple to temple in a rhythmic flow. One cycle should take around one breath.

Precautions should be taken to prevent the flow of liquid into the eyes. To avoid this, use a headband below the client's forehead and over the eyebrows and place cotton pads over the eyes. Just before the bowl is empty, draw it back while the assistant refills it with warm liquid. There must be proper communication between the client and therapist to ensure the client's continued comfort. Take care to be as quiet and continuous as possible and persevere for the prescribed time.

Once the procedure is complete, very gently wipe the recipient's forehead and hair with a towel. Encourage them to remain lying down for at least 15 minutes, then help them up, ensuring their hair is wrapped in a towel. 🧘

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