

"Relieve Tension In Seconds"

Redbook

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Don't have time for a massage? Try this bliss-inducing acupressure move from Robert MacDonald of New York's Exhale Spa:

Close your eyes, place your middle fingertip a quarter inch above the midpoint of your eyebrows, and tap lightly for ten seconds.



Ancient Treatments from the Far East By Tanya M. Williams

These days, most savvy spa-goers have experienced Shirodhara—the Ayurvedic application of warm herbal oil to one's forehead, and many more have tried Tui Na, Shiatsu, and Thai Massage, all of which have roots in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). Increasingly, these once 'exotic' treatments have become almost standard offerings, and in response, spas are digging deeper into Far Eastern traditions to create more therapeutic and truly healing services.

Historically, TCM and Ayurveda (Sanskrit for "the science of life") were developed from a quest for wellness, from the desire to treat and prevent disease. Indeed, early texts date back thousands of years, well before the advent of allopathic medicine. Thanks to the efficacy of these early forms of medicine and the diligence of dedicated practitioners throughout the ages, these once crude concepts have been elevated into a kind of art. Acupuncture, Ayurveda, and other branches of Eastern medicine have been exported from China and India to the far corners of the earth. And though Western medicine has largely approached these ancient sciences with caution and even skepticism, their popularity and proven techniques have made concepts like doshas, meridians, and qi household words.

In the last decade or so, these ancient therapies have branched out from clinics and into day and destination spas all over the planet. As the spa industry has blossomed, so too has a desire to offer discriminating clients services that are relaxing and therapeutic. ["In the future, the modern spa will provide services and resources to their client community that will allow them to achieve the highest level of sustainable personal transformation in all aspects of their daily lives—physical, spiritual, mental, and emotional," says Robert MacDonald, director of healing at Exhale Spa.](#) Both TCM and Ayurveda have been veritable gold mines for results-based spa treatments. When it comes to these age-old rituals, it seems that beauty is not just skin deep.

One of the many principles that TCM (the foundation of acupuncture, cupping, moxibustion, meridian theory, and much more) and Ayurveda share is that balance is a critical component of health. In Chinese medicine, this means that qi (energy) is flowing freely and evenly throughout the body's meridians, while in Ayurveda, good health

means that one's doshas are in balance. These doctrines speak not only to matters of physical health and wellness as we commonly view them in the West, but to emotional, spiritual, psychological, and karmic balance as well. Illness and disease are the products of imbalance, and in order for health to return, equilibrium must be restored.

What the ever-evolving spa industry has discovered is that these highly therapeutic treatments can be adapted to the treatment room with compelling results. Techniques like cupping are providing clients with an alternative to deep tissue massage, while offering therapists an effective, hand-sparing tool for addressing tension, stagnation, and tissue adhesions. Acupuncture is teaming up with esthetics for surgery-free face-lifts and with massage to mutually increase and lengthen the effects of both treatments. Meanwhile, Ayurvedic wisdom is finding its way onto spa menus from traditional offerings like Pizichilli (a kind of full-body Shirodhara with a four-handed massage), to Mandarin Oriental New York's Ama Releasing Abhyanga, which features Marma point massage, healing herbal oils, and an Oriental head massage.

Though Ayurveda has long been a source and inspiration for treatments, more and more spas are going beyond Shirodhara to offer dosha-specific therapies for their clients. At Sundara Inn & Spa in Wisconsin, clients fill out a questionnaire prior to their treatment to help them and their therapist determine their constitution. The services, including Marma massage and Vedic Facials, are then customized to their specific needs. Other spas, like Spa Moksha in Birmingham have created entire menus around Ayurvedic services. These spas offer a range of treatments from the luxurious Pizichilli to the more vigorous and detoxifying Vishesh—a four-handed friction massage usually followed by the application of hot towels (to encourage the elimination of waste) as well as lifestyle consultations and education. The Chopra Center in Southern California offers five traditional Ayurvedic treatments rolled into one with their Odyssey Enlivening Therapy. Guests are introduced to Garshana (an exfoliation), Abhyanga, Vishesh, Marma massage, and aromatherapy all in a span of 35 to 75 minutes!

Another sign of the increasing integrity of Ayurvedic spa services is a commitment to high-quality, often organic, oils. In Ayurveda, the quality of the oils is essential to the success and therapeutic benefit of the treatment. Oil is used as a tool for detoxifying the tissues as well as conditioning the skin. For that reason, establishments like The Raj Ayurvedic Health Spa will purchase products directly from India to ensure their potency. Additionally, Ayurvedic spas and product lines like Ayoma blend dosha specific herbs into their treatments, giving clients tailor-made products for both spa and home use.

TCM-based treatments like cupping, moxibustion, and acupressure/ acupuncture facials and massage are demystifying the art and science behind this ancient healing practice and bringing its principles to a wider audience than ever before. Exhale Spa, with destinations all over the U.S., offers a full menu of acupuncture-based treatments including massage, facials, energy work, and vibrational therapy. [MacDonald notes](#), "The most frequently heard comment from those new to acupuncture is that they wanted to explore [alternative] treatment, but they didn't know who to trust or where to go. Exhale provides a safe environment for our guests to explore this medicine, and the assurance of well-trained, highly skilled practitioners."

But big city spas aren't the only place to find these treatments—Sensibilities Day Spa in Asheville, North Carolina, has offered cupping to clients for more than three years. Gina

Till, head massage therapist, says that cupping enables her regular deep tissue massage clients to get longer-lasting results. “People who used to book appointments every two weeks now come in once a month.”

Intrigued to find out for myself, I booked a half-hour cupping session with Gina. She thoroughly explained the process—much like a deep tissue massage, tissues are warmed with the hands and oil, then the cups are applied. The ‘cups’ are actually glass or plastic domes. The more traditional glass form uses a flame to create a vacuum in the cup, which is then placed upon the skin. The negative pressure in the cup draws the skin and tissues up, promoting circulation, breaking up adhesions and releasing tension—literally sucking away stress and stiffness. The plastic cups use a mechanical pump to create the suction, and can therefore be significantly more intense. Depending on your body type and threshold for pain, one or the other is usually a clear favorite. After a generous half-hour of placing and sliding the cups in particularly tense spots all over my back and shoulders, I left with a touch of redness, a little soreness, but full range of motion in my neck and shoulders, something that had been missing for months!

Another ancient Chinese healing tradition that is showing up on spa menus is moxibustion. “Moxa” as it is affectionately referred to for short, is the application of heat, by way of a burning herb, to various points on the body. Theoretically similar to acupressure and acupuncture, moxa works with heat and the qi-stimulating scent of the herb, to energize and balance the body’s energy. Cleveland’s Oaks Botanical Spa offers a one-hour full-body moxibustion treatment to release blocked qi, balance yin and yang, and energize the organs related to the body’s meridians. This gentle, warming treatment is a great option for the needle phobic and is safe enough for savvy clients to perform on themselves at home.

Clearly, both acupuncture and Ayurveda have much to teach us about health, wellness, and balance. Thankfully, spas are becoming much more savvy and results-oriented with their treatments, providing both the uninitiated and the experienced client with a trustworthy, safe, and luxurious avenue for sampling the breadth of these ancient arts. Their holistic approach and emphasis on balance further provides an alternative perspective to our Western tendency to max out every minute of our day and their myriad benefits are evident in skin-tone, stress level, and spirit.