

exploring *today's* touch therapies

MASSAGE

Issue 115 • May - June 2005

www.massagemag.com

Indian Head Massage

Massage Therapists
Reach Out to
Tsunami Victims

The Psoas

Hamstring Strain

Overcome Your
Fear of Anatomy



Indian Head Massage

An ancient tradition
for modern times

by Kamala Thiagarajan

Photographs by Jonah Sutherland



Heel rub under the occiput: Place your right hand over the front of the forehead for support, and tilt the head forward. Place the heel of your left hand against the base of the skull and rub briskly and lightly.

The head is the crown of the body, the epicenter of all thought, action and life. Despite this, most bodywork therapies overlook the benefits of a soothing head rub.

Head massage, however, has always played a pivotal role in Indian life and was featured in early Ayurvedic texts that date back nearly 4,000 years. A concoction of warm oil and spices massaged in slow strokes over the scalp accounted for an Indian woman's long, lustrous hair, a feature that brought her much admiration in social circles. Even today, in many parts of India this ancient massage technique is still an integral part of a woman's grooming routine—but having progressed beyond the aesthetic and superficial, it is now revered as the therapy of the future, one that can help clients effectively battle the rigors of modern living.

Spas around the world have begun to offer Indian head massage—and therapists in private practice are learning how easy, and rewarding, this technique can be.

Journey to the West

In 1973 Narendra Mehta, an osteopath and massage therapist, traveled to England from India to study physiotherapy. During the intervening years, he was dismayed to learn that most massages, even full-body massages, did not extend farther than one's neck and shoulders. Having grown to appreciate head massage as a way of life in India, he realized how much he



Neck massage: Support the head with one hand and with the other hand spread your fingers across the base of the client's neck.

missed the soothing sessions administered by the local barber and relatives back home. Visually impaired since early childhood, Mehta was extraordinarily receptive to touch therapy. In 1978 he decided to return to India to research the physiological benefits of head massage, and spent the next couple of years documenting the skills and traditions of this technique, giving it his own personal flavor and expanding it to suit Western tastes. He developed a technique that combined massage of the face and ears, chakra balancing and scalp massage. He named his technique Indian champissage, derived from *champi*, an Indian word meaning head massage. Today the technique is known as both champissage and Indian head massage.

In 1995 the London Centre of Indian Champissage International was born, with Narendra Mehta at the helm. Today champissage is one of the United Kingdom's most widely practiced complementary therapies for stress relief—and it's a concept that is catching on fast in the United States and Canada.

Deep relaxation

With today's lightening-paced lifestyles, stress and associated illnesses are our greatest maladies. Muscle pulls, migraines, tension headaches and toxic buildup in the body are all too common. Champissage, incorporating subtle chakra-balancing procedures that anyone can learn, is an effective way to rid our systems of the energetic debris of everyday life.



Scalp massage: Support the head with one hand. Using the palm of the other hand, carry out a gentle, swift rubbing movement.

"The skillful placing of the therapist's hands on the upper three chakras—*vishuddha*, governing the throat region and its associated organs; *ajna*, the third-eye point, located on the forehead; and *sahasrara*, the master chakra associated with the pineal plexus and found at the crown of one's head, combined with visual and auditory stimuli, allow the client's innate healing energy to rebalance and harmony to prevail," explains Mehta. "If a client is feeling a little sluggish mentally, I find that working with the crown chakra and the third-eye chakra simultaneously will enable them to feel more alert and able to release pent-up emotions."

Mehta's champissage treatment begins with massage of the upper back, shoulders, upper arms and neck to melt fatigue. This is followed by a scalp massage, which is a series of integrated techniques.

One of these, the windscreen-wiper technique, is designed to stimulate the scalp, improving blood circulation. The therapist places his hand over one ear, with the fingers splayed out over the forehead. Using the ball of the other hand, a light rubbing movement is carried out on that side of the head. It is then repeated on the opposite side.



Gathering and tugging the hair: Push your fingers through the hair on either side of the client's head. Curl your fingers into fists and gently tug the hair. Continue all over the head.

The next technique is whole-hand friction. When supporting the head with one hand, the therapist applies firm pressure with the fingertips and heel of the other hand, moving the scalp up and down. This nourishes the hair from the roots and drains away tension.

Other techniques, such as ruffling, stroking, plucking and tapping the scalp and hair, prove to be profoundly relaxing. The techniques are performed in sequence, though a therapist may choose to spend more time on certain moves if this is likely to benefit the client. The massage then proceeds to the temples, which are rubbed in a firm, circular motion to relieve eyestrain and tension headaches.

Annet King is the director of training and development at the International Dermal Institute, an educational center generating awareness about skin care worldwide.

When she first experienced Indian head massage, she felt that the relaxation effect stayed with her all day.

"It was as though I'd had a full-body massage," she says. "I had better mobility in my upper body, a clearer head and brighter, less sensitive eyes."

King then realized that if stress levels were reduced, natural outcomes would be glowing skin and a radiant face.

"There are specific pressure points on the client's face, which are gently stimulated during the latter stages of the massage. These are good for boosting circulation and lymphatic draining," she explains.

King introduced champissage into her school's skincare and massage training.

"Our students are very happy with the technique. They report that the massage movements are deeply relaxing for their clients and have the added benefit of being very versatile, as they can be done through clothes and with the client seated in a chair," she says. "I personally feel that if Indian head massage really takes off in the United States, then the traditional chair massage will have some competition."

Heads-up to therapists

The nature of this therapy makes it especially popular among both spas and private practitioners. There is no expensive equipment required and very little by way of supplies.

"When I decided to open my own bodywork studio, I wanted to offer modalities that have phenomenal health benefits that the local clientele normally wouldn't find in southern New Jersey," says Jennifer Jennings Gini, owner of Absolute Haven Massage & Bodywork. "Since I have a background in massage therapy and am a believer in Ayurveda, I felt comfortable offering champissage at Absolute Haven.

"I realized back in anatomy class that the cervical/thoracic area was enormously influenced by the musculature in the subcutaneous scalp," she continues. "However, until I experienced champissage personally, I didn't have a modality that would alleviate those physical complaints originating from those areas, yet be such an enjoyable experience as well. Champissage fit the bill perfectly, and we've offered it from the first day we opened."

The biggest challenge private therapists face is getting a client past the foreignness of the modality. For this reason, sessions are often offered at about half the time and price of a traditional champissage, which usually lasts between 45-60 minutes. At Absolute Haven, the treatment costs \$25 for 20 minutes and focuses primarily on the head.

"For those clients that are hooked, we just double the treatment time and include the full neck and shoulder/upper-arm areas as well," says Gini.

Champissage in the West is a dry treatment, which makes it ideal not only for private sessions, but for airports, spas—virtually anyplace.

Denise Galone is a professional opera singer. She experienced Indian head massage from Mehta in New York City many years ago.

"My career leaves one with great physical tension in the back and neck area from holding the chest up and expanding neck muscles for long periods of time," she says. "This therapy was the first to give me relief of the muscular tension in those areas.

"During our session, Narendra Mehta asked me whether I would like to have a stimulating or relaxing massage," Galone continues. "Since it was late in the night I opted for a relaxing massage. When it was over, I could barely make it to a taxi! I slept very deeply that night. The next day I couldn't wait to have a stimulating [Indian head] massage to see the difference. I discovered an alertness and energy that I had never before experienced. Again, I slept a deep, relaxed sleep."

This experience compelled Galone to study the techniques of Indian head massage in-depth and embark on her journey of healing. She also found that although she didn't have the strength required for the massage profession, that hardly mattered when it came to this therapy.

Today, she holds certification in head massage from the London Centre of Indian Champissage International. "I have given relief for simple tensions, major headaches and injuries, and even extreme emotional trauma," says Galone. "As a result, several of my clients have completely stopped or dramatically reduced their depression medication, with the consult of their doctors. There is compassion in the head work that doesn't exist in regular body massage, so it releases deep-seated physical and emotional stress more effectively," she says.

Tom Buteau, director of Massage Dynamics, in Cheyenne, Wyoming, traveled to India to learn the technique from its land of origin. Seated with a local barber in Varanasi, India's pilgrimage town, Buteau realized how subtle this touch therapy is.



Ear massage: Gently pinch the ears using thumb and forefingers; pull the ears up and down gently.

"The difficulty lies in determining the lightness of the touch," he says. "The therapist must exert caution, because the concentration of sensitive points in the head region of the body can vary dramatically between two people. Too much pressure can make your client flee from the touch completely and too [little] will not open up" the marma points, or energy portals along the body.

Consequently, a slow buildup is recommended for balancing the chakra energy. This can be done by inserting movements that require greater pressure at the end of the session, when the client is better able to take it in stride.

Head massage as a spa therapy

Champiassage in the West is a dry treatment, which makes it ideal not only for private sessions, but for airports, spas—virtually anyplace. However, most spas that offer this treatment will give clients the option of using Ayurvedic medicated oil. Warmed coconut, sesame, olive and vegetable oils are used in accordance with client preference.

Elemental Embrace is a spa based in Brighton, Ontario, Canada. Indian head massage is featured as Shirobhyanga therapy and was introduced on the spa's opening day, in late 2004. The treatment lasts 30 minutes and costs \$45 Canadian (about \$37 American).

"It is a favorite therapy among our clientele and is often the first experienced by our guests during their stay,



Relax the face: Lay your hands on the face with the palms of your hands over the cheeks or chin, then gently trail your fingers up and down the face.

especially if they have traveled great distances to reach our spa," says Jazir Teja, the spa's director. "Once they arrive, it is common for guests to want to increase the number of therapies they experience here. Indian head massage is relatively shorter than most and we can often fit it in during busier periods."

Ananda Yoga, Canada's only solely Ayurvedic destination spa, in Codrington, Ontario, has offered Indian head massage since 1999. It is performed in a very authentic way here, using Ayurvedic medicinal oils like *bringaraja*, *brahmi* and *amla*, which are rubbed onto the scalp. It lasts for a duration of 45 minutes and costs guests \$100 Canadian (about \$82 American). "I believe it is popular because it is a unique stress reliever, focusing on all the marma points of the head; this with the warm oils puts the client in a state of complete relaxation," says Jacinda Thomson, the spa's general manager.

In the United States Indian head massage is becoming more popular at spas. The spa at the Mandarin Hotel in Miami offers this therapy as Oriental scalp massage.

"It was introduced [at] the opening in 2001 and is very popular both as stand-alone treatment and addition to other treatments," says Pilar Spitale, the spa's communications coordinator.



Whole-hand friction: The head is supported by one hand, while you apply firm friction with the other hand. Repeat with hands in several positions on the scalp. (The scalp should move under your hands, rather than your hands sliding over the scalp.)

Lasting 20 minutes, the treatment costs \$65 and is often combined with the application of pink hair-and-scalp mud, which is said to be cooling and soothing. Some guests prefer to combine the head massage with a facial, and end with a neck-and-shoulder rub to enhance relaxation.

More spas are getting into the act. Enhance Face & Body Spa in Hartsdale, New York, introduced a scalp, neck and face body treatment last fall. Their marketing involved mailing brochures to their best clients, incorporating the history and healing effects of Indian head massage. The 30-minute session costs \$45.

As awareness grows in leaps and bounds, many more spas and therapists in private practice are sure to realize the restorative potential of Indian head massage.

Kamala Thiagarajan is a freelance journalist in Madurai, South India. She writes about health and Fitness, alternative therapy and esoteric healing, and has been published in six countries.



Stroking: Place one hand flat over the top of the head with fingers pointing forward at the front of the hairline, and gently bring the hand towards the back of the head.

To Learn More ...

Training

More than 2,000 students have been trained by the London Centre of Indian Champissage International, and the numbers are growing, especially among bodywork therapists in North America.

The most formal training is a three-day program taught by Narendra Mehta. Mehta trains more than 250 students yearly in locations round the globe. After the training, students take a certification exam, which leads to a diploma in Indian champissage.

For more information, visit www.indianchampissage.com, call 44 (0) 20-7609-3590 or e-mail: indianchampissage@yahoo.com

Books

Indian Head Massage – Discover the Power of Touch, by Narendra Mehta (HarperCollins, 2000)