

GHEE WHIZZ

AYURVEDA, INDIA'S TRADITIONAL HEALING SYSTEM, IS OLDER THAN BUDDHISM BUT IS NOW HAVING A DISTINCTLY MODERN MOMENT

BY DAISY FINER. IMAGES BY SAMANTHA CASOLARI

AFTER YEARS OF EXPERIENCING all manner of European detoxes – from juice cleanses to the famously flushing Mayr diet – it wasn't until recently that I underwent a detoxifying Ayurvedic panchakarma. Despite the fact that I wasn't exactly slumming it – I stayed in five-star style at one of my favourite spas in the world, the Four Seasons Landaa Giraavaru in the Maldives – it was definitely one of the most challenging and unpalatable regimes I have encountered. What surprised me the most was that none of the usual rules applied. Under no circumstances was I allowed to exercise, nor could I drink fresh coconut water, usually advocated for its nutritional benefits. Other rules included no sunbathing, no sex and, honestly worst of all, no sleep during the day – the idea being to reset your body clock. I had left three small children behind at home. I was serious, and more than a tiny bit angry, when I explained to Dr Shylesh, the Ayurvedic

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doctor in charge, that I hadn't slept properly in years. At one point he actually appeared from behind a bush just as I was about to doze off on the beach, declaring 'No sleep Miss Daisy, NO sleep.' I soon realised that while I might not be in motherland India, they take their Ayurveda seriously here. Most challenging of all? Drinking a daily cup of mildly spiced and salted ghee, the clarified butter revered for its seemingly endless beneficial effects. It is said to loosen the toxins until they seep through to your pores. Once this happens the body is ready for a variety of rather horrific toxin-releasing techniques such as emesis (vomiting), purgatives, enemas and even nasal therapy, in which strips of linen are passed up both nostrils – 'the door to the brain' – before being threaded out of the throat.

I completed my panchakarma in 10 days, the shortest period allowed; the recommended time is 21 days, and if undertaken for this long the effects are meant to last three years. While admitting that it was by far the most difficult detox I have ever done – despite the joy of the two-hour, two-therapist spa treatments (on wooden massage beds with brass jugs of oil and lots of steam-room heat) – I can also hand-on-heart say that it was the most effective, transformative and revealing experience I've been through. By the time I got home I was so grounded my feet literally felt magnetically attached to the floor. I had been taken back to the basic essence of 'me'. Free. Gap Year alive. Time was flowing

at my pace. Several months afterwards, I had integrated much of what I learnt (respecting my unique body clock, eating the right foods, sleeping for enough hours) into my daily life with much greater ease than I have after returning from other, more familiar cleanses.

So I am an ardent convert to Ayurveda. I already knew it was the traditional healing system of India, believed to be the oldest surviving complete system of knowledge in the world. Now I also know it to provide one of the most exceptional and spiritual cleansing regimes I have come across. One that works on all levels without just being concerned with weight-loss. Ayurveda has been practiced in India for around 5,000 years and descriptions of it appear in the Vedas, the country's original literature. It translates as 'science of life' in Sanskrit – *ayu* means life and *veda* means knowledge – and this holistic system is a subtle, complex, all-embracing prescription for how to live your life. As one starts to explore the subject it seems a shame the philosophy has, until recently, been so little known in the West.

Plenty of Ayurvedic lifestyle advice is easy to take on board. Nutmeg stirred into hot water will help you sleep, chewing fennel seeds will get rid of bad breath; a paste of turmeric and sandalwood powder clears acne; inhaling steam from hot water mixed with powdered ginger can relieve a cold. It is also considered important to sit up straight when eating, avoid distractions and focus on the sensation of chewing. One should consume no more than the equivalent of two handfuls of food at a meal because overeating, apparently, causes the production of toxins in the digestive tract – but eating light foods such as millet, tapioca and rye will not increase your weight even if taken in large quantities. One should try to incorporate yoga and meditation into a daily

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routine, and rise with the sun, sleep with the moon. Ayurveda provides a pattern to a whole way of life. With the crazy pace of our modern world it's no wonder that we are starting to see an emerging acceptance of this ancient wisdom.

IN 2015, EMINE RUSHTON'S book *The Body Balance Diet Plan* was praised for translating this philosophical medical system into a language that makes it easily applicable to 21st-century living, including advice on eating with the seasons, the power of spice, curbing cravings, and understanding your

body type. And in the same year, the UK's first proper Ayurvedic retreat opened: Clover Mill in Worcestershire. While owner Julie Dent doesn't offer the full panchakarma cleanse, she does arrange personal programmes with delicious, home-cooked Ayurvedic meals, expertly delivered spa treatments – including abhyanga massage and the insanely relaxing shirodhara (the continual pouring of warm oil onto the middle of the forehead) – daily yoga, and lovely eco-lodges to sleep in. I recommend even a three-night stay if you are seeking a turnaround.

Elsewhere, Jasmine Hemsley's pop-up café East by West on London's Conduit Street was inspired by her own panchakarma journey in India last summer and served modern food based on Ayurvedic concepts, including golden milk, flavoured with a powerhouse of spices: turmeric (anti-inflammatory) and cardamom (anti-spasmodic). In Ayurveda, warm milk (organic and full fat) is believed to be easily digested, nourishes all the tissues and promotes balanced emotions. Jasmine has also just secured a book deal for an Ayurvedic cookbook – and the East by West website has an online questionnaire so you can establish your body type, or dosha.

Understanding your dosha is key to Ayurveda. For those not familiar with the basics, an Ayurvedic approach to health is filtered through a framework of three different body types. Dr Vasant Lad, who, in 1984, founded the Ayurvedic Institute in New Mexico, is author of the most comprehensible books on the subject. He was inspired to become a doctor after seeing how an Ayurvedic expert cured his grandmother of high blood pressure and swelling so bad that even taking her pulse was impossible. As he explains, each person's constitution is made up of the five basic elements – air, fire, water, earth and ether – manifested as three principles, or tridosha. Each person has a predominant dosha: vata (made up of ether and air), pitta (fire and water) or kapha (earth and water), and these 'govern all the biological functions of the mind, body and consciousness'. So what you eat, and the various lifestyle approaches you should adopt are all dependent on which dosha you are. It's a solid system that provides a basis for getting to know yourself inside and out, with much of the advice straightforward – if you have too much heat in your body, for example, eat more cooling foods.

But don't be fooled into thinking Ayurveda is just about filling in multiple-choice forms, or, worse still, that it is some kind of hocus-pocus. It is so much more than this, and its basic philosophy is grounded in truisms that I repeatedly

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see manifested in spas around the world, whether they are Ayurvedic or not. These include the theory that everything found in nature has medicinal value if used in the proper manner, that good digestion is the foundation of good health – hence the emphasis on eating the correct foods for one's constitution. Ayurveda teaches that we all have the power to maintain good health through correct diet and exercise and a daily routine that includes yoga and breathing and time for quiet contemplation. Frankly it makes Western spa industry look a trifle late to the party. I went to meet Anne McIntyre, an Ayurvedic herbalist based in the

Cotswolds and who runs a clinic in London. She has been practicing for more than 30 years, and gives wonderful tours of her garden where she grows more than 150 species of herbs, including those to help babies to sleep and wild yam and lady's mantle to promote fertility. Her office is packed with enticing bottles, labelled BFG-style with the complaints they are said to cure, from 'night coughs' to 'love handles'. 'As ancient as Ayurveda is,' says McIntyre, 'it is based on truths that are still relevant today.'

There is a lot to find out about Ayurveda and should you wish to learn more you'd be following a long line of students. The first Ayurvedic school, McIntyre informs me, was

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founded in 800bc by a physician called Punarvasu Atreya. To be enrolled, prospective students were given the task of collecting plants from the jungle that had no medicinal value. Only one student, Jivaka, returned empty-handed and was instantly accepted. Over the centuries Ayurveda thrived, influencing systems of medicine across the world, from ancient Greece to China. The Buddha was a follower, and so it spread via monks to Tibet, China, Mongolia, Korea and Sri Lanka. It is shameful to think that in 1833 the British closed all Ayurvedic schools, proclaiming it as nothing more than native superstition. And yet this was knowledge that had been handed down through countless generations, by traditional healers, grandmothers and nomadic elders. But by 1947 it had begun to flourish again and there are now Ayurvedic hospitals all over India, and the World Health Organisation is determined to promote its benefits in developing countries where it can provide an inexpensive and effective alternative to Western drugs.

Obviously it is preferable to experience Ayurveda in retreat environment rather than a hospital. Stalwarts of the scene include grand dames Kalari Kovikalom and Carnoustie in Kerala (the latter is the more modern and luxurious), and all the bigger destination spas have Ayurvedic treatments, including Vana (where you can undergo panchakarma) and Ananda in the Himalayas. Amanbagh in Rajasthan has recently introduced an Ayurvedic doctor, food menu and treatments with a sophistication rarely seen in more traditional outposts. In Europe, The Kempinski on Gozo and Hotel de France in Jersey both offer an Ayurvedic approach, as does the more comprehensive and immaculate Parkschlösschen outside Frankfurt, where guests are encouraged to rest as well as to join the yoga classes or swim under the gaze of a giant Buddha, and the delectable vegetarian food is prepared by a German chef who was a longtime resident of India. And in Austria, Sonnhof is a small, family-run Tyrolean lodge that is extremely good value, with a warm atmosphere and the lovely Dr Alaettin Sinop, an Indian GP and naturopath, who can tell, just by holding your hand, what sort of state you are in – 'like a police car with the siren constantly on, your adrenalin is on full throttle'. Even after just a few days you'll feel calmer and clearer.

Beyond the spa scene, one of the key elements of Ayurveda that can be brought into daily life is meditation. According to author and wellness expert Deepak Chopra, 'the guiding

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principle of Ayurveda is that the mind exerts the deepest influence on the body, and freedom from sickness depends upon contacting our awareness, bringing it into balance and extending that balance to the body'.

Vedic meditation is rooted in those same ancient Vedas, and is becoming popular because it is a very simple technique that anyone can practise (no need to be a monk up a mountain). It uses a personalised mantra, given to you by an experienced teacher and relating to your constitution, the sound of which is silently repeated to enable the body and mind to settle down. So there's no 'trying' or 'straining' to meditate; it's an effortless process. It takes you beyond your thoughts – so crucial these days as we are bombarded by digital technology and the insatiable processing of information. This over-stimulation creates a physiological reaction in the body that's the same as with any other kind of stress, causing an imbalance in the nervous system that makes us feel frazzled. So if we can manage our over-thinking minds on a day-to-day basis, we can de-stress the nervous system and the whole body. A virtuous circle happens: our minds feel clearer, more focused, we eat, sleep, feel and look better, and that's just the beginning.

Based in London, Will Williams is a go-to Vedic-meditation teacher for forward-thinking peace-of-mind

THE MIND HAS A DEEP INFLUENCE ON THE BODY, AND FREEDOM FROM SICKNESS DEPENDS ON CONTACTING OUR AWARENESS

seekers. A musician and former band promoter, Williams left the mayhem of the music industry to travel, eventually training in India with Maharishi Vyasanaanda (aka Thom Knoles), one of the masters of Vedic meditation. Along with his partner, Jess Cook, Williams leads weekend/week-long retreats in a rambling mansion in the Sussex countryside, where participants bed down as if at a house party, sustained by transformative yogic exercises and meditation, deep discussion, and lashings of Ayurvedic veggie food. He also hosts 'healthy' socials in the capital, including a Shavasana Disco where everyone lies down to listen to classic albums such as *Diamond Dogs* mindfully (it's surprising what you hear when you really listen). Williams' meditation is fuelled by an ability to put ancient Vedic teachings in context with modern life, the latest health research and advances in science and technology. And so we see where Ayurveda is heading: into a glorious fusion of East and West, one feeding the other. We can be reassuringly certain in the knowledge that when it comes to self-care, while we might sometimes lose our way, everything we need has already been discovered. We just have to re-find it.

BOOK IT: HEALING HOLIDAYS (+44 20 7843 3592; HEALINGHOLIDAYS.CO.UK) OFFERS THE FOLLOWING AYURVEDA PACKAGES: A SIX-NIGHT ANTI-STRESS PROGRAMME AT PARKSCHLOSSEN, GERMANY, FROM £2,575 PER PERSON; SEVEN-NIGHT EXPLORE AYURVEDA PROGRAMME AT FOUR SEASONS LANDAA GIRAAVARU, MALDIVES, FROM £8,695; THREE-NIGHT AYURVEDA TASTER AT AYURVEDA RESORT SONNHOF, AUSTRIA FROM £859; FOUR-NIGHT AYUR WELLNESS EXPERIENCE AT AMANBAGH, INDIA, FROM £3,299

PICK-ME-UPS

THE ANSWERS ACCORDING TO AYURVEDA



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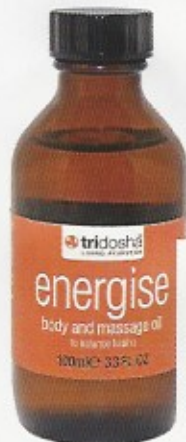
SOLUTION

Bad breath
Rasasara Royal Mukhwas mouthwash
Ditch the mints for a more holistic approach. When gargled, the palate-cleansing rosewater, cinnamon and clove liquid rinses the mouth of toxins that gather overnight. And a complimentary scraper is included to keep the tongue clean and ready for breakfast. About £35; rasasara.com

AILMENT

SOLUTION

Looking exhausted
Pratima Saffron Eye Ghee
Normally used in cooking, ghee has amazing benefits for the face, too. Resist pinching a scoop from the kitchen though – this unction smells much better. The saffron tackles hyper-pigmentation of dark circles and the nourishing ghee softens fine lines and strengthens under-eye skin. About £30; pratimaskincare.com



AILMENT

SOLUTION

An inability to switch off
T2 Ayurvedic Tea Chai Loose Leaf
With less caffeine than a coffee and laced with cardamom, pink peppercorns and a blend of green and white tea, this milky sweet drink is the grown-up version of a hot chocolate. The flavonoids are said to neutralise free radicals, help increase peace of mind and slow down those monkey thoughts. £7.50; t2tea.com



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SOLUTION

Muscle pain
Jiva Apoha Parutka Body Oil,

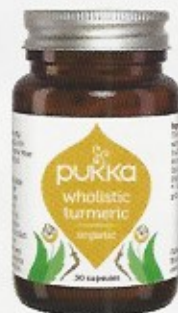
A sweet almond oil base heavy with anti-inflammatory marjoram and turmeric essence to help soothe sore joints and relieve nagging aches, as well as boosting circulation. But you'll need to find someone to give you the massage. About £50; jivaapoha.com



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SOLUTION

Coughs and colds
Pukka Wholistic Turmeric
Ayurvedic superstar spice turmeric, famed for its antioxidant properties, is now found everywhere from lattes, curries, bone broths and here in pill form. A supplement a day, with its immune-boosting curcumin, should keep the doctor away. £15.95; pukkaherbs.com



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SOLUTION

Struggling to lose weight
Tridosha Energise Body Oil (Kapha)
A citrusy-fresh grapefruit concoction that gives metabolism a kickstart via digestive-juice-stimulating palmarosa, and helps the expulsion of toxins with ginger and liquorice. £23; tri-dosha.co.uk