

The Problem of ‘Stuckness’ in the Flow: The Role of Marma Therapy

It’s clear from the discussion so far that disease and all the forms of suffering that it brings arise from ‘stuckness’ in this flow in all its forms, and from excessive accumulation of the doshas in specific areas. Causes can be external (injury, environment) or internal (thought, emotion, breath patterns); the solution is to reestablish proper flow and the overall process of digestion and assimilation, as well as to reestablish proper balance of the doshas for healthy functioning.

Marma therapy as a significant part of Ayurvedic therapy looks specifically to the intricate network of channels for the flow of energy in all its forms that threads through the body from the level of blood and organs through the seven kinds of tissues to the most refined level of subtle nerve and pranic impulses on the level of the brain / mind.

This aspect of Ayurveda forms a **significant connection between the principles Ayurvedic therapy and our treatment of ‘Yoga As Therapy;**’ the connection is via the role of Marma therapy and its relationship to hatha yoga. The ‘big picture’ of hatha yoga as therapy looks beyond structural issues (which are quite important in their own right) to the overall ‘flow’ of energy or srotamsi within ourselves that affects our health at every level. Once this flow is understood, there are many complementary avenues to health — through diet according to Ayurvedic principles of the doshas, massage as Marma therapy, and hatha yoga, meditation and pranayama, which fall in the realm of ‘Yoga as Therapy.’

In each of these modalities, the concern with ‘flow’ or srotamsi has to do with actions on the tissues of the body that work to increase or decrease circulation through them. This primarily promotes the flow of blood and plasma; but marma (and yoga) also works on the deeper tissues of bone and nerve, touching upon the realm of Prana.

There are levels upon which we work, each of which involves appropriate fields of treatment:

1. The outer tissues of rasa/plasma and blood are affected mainly by nutrition — our intake of food and drink. This falls squarely in the realm of Ayurveda as we commonly know it, which is very concerned with the effect of diet upon the Doshas and thus upon the production of the Dhatus.
2. The intermediate tissues of muscle, fat and bone are of course influenced by nutrition, but are also heavily affected by how we use our body — both in terms of our posture, and also how we work and exercise the body.

This falls within the realm of hatha yoga as therapy, as well as Ayurvedic (and other forms) of massage — all of which implicitly contain elements of marma therapy. The physical practice is its own discipline of purification or ‘shuddhi,’ which liberates greater energy through increasing healthy flow or srotamsi. The greater part of this manual will be concerned with therapy on this level.

3. The inner tissues of nerve and reproductive tissue (as productive of Ojas) are affected by our mental and emotional ‘behavior,’ especially in relation to others.

This of course has to do with how we handle our mind and emotions, and falls within the realm of yoga as meditation, and the practices of purification or ‘shuddhi’ associated with that.

These are of course not isolated ‘compartments’ of therapeutic modalities, but rather blend together into a comprehensive and coherent approach to ‘therapy,’ which ranges far beyond diet and exercise alone. Both yoga and traditional marma therapy, at their subtlest and most refined, work to change behavioral patterns and unlock Prana that is held deep within the tissues. This can address even psychological problems, releas-

ing them from the tissues in which they are held.²⁸

Marma Therapy: A Closer Look

Marma therapy or *Marma Chikitsa* has been an important part of Ayurveda since its earliest times. ‘Marma’ is a Sanskrit term for ‘vulnerable’ or ‘sensitive’ points on the body. These include specific points both on the surface of the body, such as points on the hands or feet, and internal, including large marmas such as the heart and the bladder.²⁹

Injury to marmas — whether through structural misalignment or through trauma, can quickly affect our health and vitality. An ancient version of the term is ‘varma,’ which refers to a protective shield or armor; these points are meant to be protected against injury in battle and in the Indian martial arts.

There are ‘therapeutic’ marmas as well which, when manipulated, can alter both the organic function as well as the structural condition of the body, and even transform our overall energy. There are of course overlaps between the two types of marma.

Marmas are centers for the Prana, and serve like switches that can turn the Prana ‘up’ or ‘down.’ They are points or areas on the body that can be manipulated with either acupressure (which is far more common) or with needles (which is only practiced by some Ayurvedic doctors in South India and Sri Lanka as ‘marma-puncture’).³⁰

Marma, Meridians and Chakras

Marmas can be of varying sizes, from small points to the size of a hand. It’s tempting to relate them to acupuncture points, but acupuncture points are usually smaller in size and more specific in their location. Moreover, marmas are not related to the meridian system of Chinese medicine, though it’s tempting to make that comparison as well.³¹

Instead, marmas are directly related to the Chakra, Nadi and Srota (channel of flow) systems of Yoga. Points on the body we associate with the chakras — such as the crown of the head or the ‘third eye’ — are also important marma points. The end points of the ‘nadis’ or ‘rivers’ of pranic flow in the body, such as the palms of the hands and the feet, are likewise important marma points.³² The key to the importance of marmas is their connection to prana, which is central to the overall system of Yoga.

Marma, Prana and Yoga

Our physical anatomy is designed to hold prana, and it is the prana or life force that is primary. Prana and the Vata dosha reside and accumulate in the empty spaces of the body, especially in the spine and in the joints.³³ This is an important reason why so much emphasis is placed upon the health, freedom and mobility of the joints in yoga especially — to maintain the ‘graceful flow’ of prana through the key marma points in these joints.

Moreover, it’s important to understand that, given the very nature of the prana — which is ‘to move’ — the main pranic point in a particular marma area may shift or move over time. The nature of this energy is more important than structure. It can be tempting to think that there is an ideal energetic structure or

28 Ayurveda and Marma Therapy, David Frawley p. 22

29 ‘Marma Therapy: Energy Points of Yogic and Ayurvedic Healing,’ Dr. David Frawley, LA Yoga Magazine, January/February 2004, Volume 3, Number 1. <http://www.layogamagazine.com/issue9/feature/feature.htm>

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

“blueprint” for the human being, and that the more we bring our physical structure into conformity with this ideal blueprint — a kind of Platonic Ideal — the healthier we will be. But there are some serious pitfalls to this way of understanding.

For one thing, we run the risk of giving ‘alignment’ too much primacy, ultimately suggesting that the more we approach a physical ideal, the greater our potential for fulfillment. But if anything, we are coming to understand how adaptable the physical body can be to the flow of consciousness. To give one example, however much we are coming to understand how localities in the brain have specific functions, we have also seen cases in which some parts of the brain have been injured or destroyed, and other parts have taken up their function. The Prana is not limited to expressing itself through a particular structure; there is a great deal of room for individuality and nuance, and so there can be no single rigid system of a priori principles for approaching the Prana.

This is expressed in the marma system. There are special marma points that are unique to a person’s individual anatomical structure, and thus any treatment through marma therapy has to be sensitive to and recognize that uniqueness. By the same token, there are also marma points that are unique to a person’s energy patterns, self-expression or psychology. There are non-physical marmas located in the field of prana that surrounds the individual — such as depicted in ancient drawings of the ‘nadis’ that extend beyond the boundaries of the physical body. Thus there are points above or behind the head. Thus, as David Frawley says, “Even the more obviously physical marmas are an expression of a deeper energy that is the most important factor, not simply their anatomical location. Besides the classical fixed marmas, we must also recognize such variable and changing marmas. We should view marmas and marma therapy more in terms of prana and energy than in simply physical location or physical manipulation.”³⁴

This demands that we be open and sensitive to what is present, whether in ourselves or in others, without being enamored with a fixed system for seeing or analyzing a condition. The physical — our understanding of anatomy and of principles for working with anatomy — is a starting point, but only a starting point. Knowing the physical is not even our ultimate goal, but rather to know the Prana. Prana as the life force and form of Divine Creative Consciousness is neutral. It is pure energy without any qualities beyond sat-chid-ananda (Being, Consciousness and Bliss). It can take on any qualities without losing this purity, just as we can put on clothes and be characterized in a certain way because of our appearance, and yet never be truly changed by that appearance (though we may choose to identify with it for a while).

If we practice yoga with the understanding that mind and body arise from this unknown source, then we truly understand that the purpose of a true practice of yoga — even ‘therapeutic’ yoga — is not ultimately to know the body or mind, but to know that unknown Source. The yogic scriptures repeat again and again; know that Source, and you will know everything. Thus as the writer Atreya says, “It is not the method or the practice that is yoga; rather it is our search for that unknown Source that is yoga. Pranic healing is simply a method; it can also be used as yoga, to lead us to the source of our vital force and the source of all that exists.”³⁵

So this aspect of Ayurveda is also an essential aspect of the science of Yoga, inasmuch as Yoga also recognizes the power of Prana that is reflected at these marma points. Our understanding of marma points can increase the therapeutic value of a yoga practice that includes asana, pranayama and meditation, since these energy centers are key to deepening each of these levels of practice. Asanas in particular can be used to stimulate and balance marmas, and the massaging or stimulating of specific marmas in particular asanas can be used to heighten their effects.

34 ‘Marma Therapy: Energy Points of Yogic and Ayurvedic Healing,’ Dr. David Frawley, LA Yoga Magazine, January/February 2004, Volume 3, Number 1. <http://www.layogamagazine.com/issue9/feature/feature.htm>

35 Prana: The Secret of Yogic Healing, Atreya, p. 4

Hatha Yoga and Marma Therapy

While the physical and therapeutic aspects of yoga have in recent times become more structurally oriented, thanks to the insightful work of B.K.S. Iyengar, yoga via its roots in Ayurveda has traditionally been less concerned with the structure of the body than with the factors behind its organic function. Thus Robert Svoboda has pointed out:

“Even in Ayurveda’s study of the physical body the idea of structure never quite becomes concrete, because knowing how the body’s constituents interact is more meaningful than knowing their gross anatomy. While the texts do name each bone and most of the organs, Ayurvedic anatomy is more concerned with the overall organization of the system than with its many parts. Aristotle taught that the body’s tissues exist to serve its organs, while Ayurveda teaches that the organs exist to serve the production and nutrition of the tissues... Concern with organ structure is replaced in Ayurveda with attention to dosha location, movement and function. The Three Doshas pervade the body, working in every cell of every tissue every moment of the day, but concentrate themselves in those tissues in which they are particularly required.”³⁶

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Thus as we’ve seen, in Ayurveda there was greater attention to the subtler ‘energies’ of the doshas, and to how one’s diet, practice and lifestyle (including one’s practice of hatha yoga) affects the balance of these energies and thus the health of the whole. Traditional yoga reflects this physiological view of Ayurveda, with its emphasis on doshas, tissues and channel systems, as well as the role of marmas. Thus the original forms of hatha yoga gave little apparent attention to specific physical alignment and action in the asanas, and far more attention to subtler actions such as the bandhas, and to the effect of the postures on prana and awareness. Specific attention to structure and alignment — on the level of that taught by B.K.S. Iyengar — is a recent development in the history of yoga, and a vital one that recognizes the influence of structure and alignment on organic function and the deeper workings of these energies.

Hatha yoga practices inherently involved the Prana, and along with that included involved accounts of the chakras and subtle nadi systems through which the Prana moves. The marma points of Ayurveda provide us with the connection between the Ayurvedic system of doshas, tissues (dhatus) and channel systems (srotamsi), and the subtle energy networks described by yoga.

The Historical Connection Between Marma and Yoga

The marma system played a special role in the Siddha system of medicine, which was a tantric and South Indian form of Ayurveda. The founder of this science was the Vedic rishi and sage Agastya.³⁷

In the Siddha system of tantra, the conception of what we described earlier as *Purusha* and *Prakriti* from Samkhya Yoga is far more dynamic. In the Siddha system, the universe originates from Shiva, who is Being (‘Sat’) and is thought of as Prana at rest, and from Parvati, who is active, self-aware Consciousness (Cit-Shakti) and is thought of as Prana in motion. Their use of marma or varma was a therapeutic form of energy treatment that connects to both Shiva and Shakti forces in the individual.³⁸

The varma points were understood to be places where physical, mental and psychic energies concentrate or converge, and thus were places where vital energy in the body can become blocked, whether through injury, or through internal causes such as emotion. Because the blockages are ‘made of’ psychic energy, they were to be controlled by meditation, mantra, pranayama and other yogic practices and techniques.³⁹

The Siddha system represented the most direct connection of marma vidya and the full expanse of yoga as a spiritual art. Marmas entered prominently into yogic thought in the Tantric systems of yoga. Since marmas carry the energy or prana that develops from the chakras and nadis of the subtle body, they can be

36 Robert Svoboda, *Ayurveda: Life, Health and Longevity* p. 66

37 *Ayurveda and Marma Therapy*, David Frawley p. 7

38 *Ibid.*, p. 7

39 *Ibid.*, p. 7

used to energize the physical body from within, rather than by outward manipulation. By the same token, yogis practiced pranic concentration — particularly through pranayama — on specific marmas to help the opening of the chakras and nadis, or simply to help with the overall process of purification of the body or ‘shuddhi.’⁴⁰

Definitions of Marma

The condition of marma points can be used as a diagnostic tool, since it is here that toxins, stress and negative emotions can get lodged and ‘stuck,’ sometimes for years. Palpating these points can give clues to a condition, and Prana can be directed at these points to remove blockages, improve energy flow, and remove pain and swelling.

There are a number of classical definitions of Marma set forth by a number of the sages of Ayurveda:

1. Charaka defined marmas as sites where muscles, veins, ligaments, bones and joints meet together; they are the significant points of conjunction in the physical body, though these structures don’t have to be present at each marma.⁴¹
2. Vagbhatta initially defined marmas much as Charaka did, as sites where important nerves come together along with structures such as muscles and tendons. But he goes on to say that sites which are painful, tender or show abnormal pulsation should also be considered as marma, regardless of their anatomical structure. Under this definition, ‘trigger points,’ injuries and even temporary traumas would be considered marma until they are healed. Marma has a more expansive meaning as ‘seats of Life’ or ‘Prana’ in this definition.⁴²
3. Sushruta defined marmas as places where the three doshas are present along with their subtle forms (Prana, Tejas and Ojas) as well as the three gunas (Sattva, Rajas and Tamas). Thus marmas are significant points of conjunction which control not only the doshas, but also their subtle essences as well as the mind (via the sattva guna). Special emphasis was given to Ojas as the power of immunity; the work with marmas can help maintain the immune system, as well as be used in practices of rejuvenation. In the realm of the mind, marmas can relieve stress and help to promote meditation.⁴³
4. Marmas mark the meeting point of body and mind. As such they provide sites that provoke mental, sensory and emotional responses, and can be treated to release negative emotions and mental blockages, including unconscious blockages.⁴⁴

These definitions of the marmas show the breadth and expanse of their application. In the end, it is helpful to us to keep in mind that in general, **any painful point on the body becomes a kind of marma, as long as the pain exists.** As such, the concept of marma is accessible to us today, even if we are less familiar with their energetic components, because they are classified according to their dominant physical constituents — muscle, vessel, ligament, joint and bone-based areas. This is useful to us in our own approach in this manual because it helps us to distinguish the different areas or realms of therapeutic problems, and at the same time include reference to the appropriate marmas within each realm, and their application in and through yoga practice.

40 ‘Marma Therapy: Energy Points of Yogic and Ayurvedic Healing,’ Dr. David Frawley, LA Yoga Magazine, January/February 2004, Volume 3, Number 1. <http://www.layogamagazine.com/issue9/feature/feature.htm>

41 Ayurveda and Marma Therapy, David Frawley p. 34

42 Ibid., p. 34

43 Ibid., p. 34

44 Ibid., p. 34