

# Concept of Swedana-Karma in Ayurveda

Dr Murlidhar Paliwal\*

## Abstract

Ayurveda advocates number of therapeutic procedures for the cure of different diseases. *Snehana*, *Swedana*, *Langhana*, *Brimhana*, *Rukshana* and *Stambhana* are the *Shadupakramas* (six therapeutic procedures) on which entire clinical practice depends and it is the reason why *Acharya Charak* has stated that only he is the real physician who knows these *Shadupakramas*. Either it is the case of *Kayachikitsa* or of *Shalya-chikitsa*, these *upakramas* (therapeutic procedures) are considered and applied according to the need of the patient and disease. *Swedana-karma* is one significant *upakrama* out of *Shadupakramas*. *Sweda*, *gharma*, and *nidagha* are the synonyms having the meaning of perspiration. *Swedana-karma* (fomentation) means that thermal or non-thermal procedure which cures stiffness, heaviness and cold and produces sweating in the body. By virtue of the properties of *Swedana dravyas*, it is mainly beneficial in *Vata-Kaphaja rogas* (diseases). Different types of *Swedana* are discussed in Ayurveda considering different diseases and their stages. *Sagni-niragni*, *ruksha-snigdha* and *ekanga-sarvanga Swedana* are discussed in the text which explores the area and scope of this procedure.

**Keywords:** *Dosha*, *Roga*, *Swedana*, *Shaman*, *Shodhan*, *Chikitsa*.

## Introduction

Ayurveda, the science of life and our cultural heritage, is completely concerned with welfare of the living beings.<sup>1</sup> It is serving the mass through its time tested useful therapeutic procedures such as *Snehana*, *Swedana*, *Langhana*, *Brimhana*, *Rukshana*, *Stambhana*, *Panchakarma*, *Kshar-karma*, *Agnikarma*, *Jalauka-Avachara* and so on. *Swedana-karma* (Fomentation therapy) is one of the significant procedures among all. *Sweda*, *gharma*, and *nidagha* are the synonymous meaning perspiration or sweating. *Swedana-karma* means that thermal or non-thermal procedure which cures stiffness, heaviness and cold and produces sweating in the body.<sup>2</sup> By virtue of the properties of *Swedana dravyas*, it is mainly beneficial in *Vata-Kaphaja rogas* (diseases).<sup>3</sup> Different types of *Swedana* are discussed in Ayurveda considering different diseases and their stages. *Sagni-niragni*, *ruksha-snigdha* and *ekanga-sarvanga Swedana* are discussed in the text using different methods which explore the area and scope of this procedure.<sup>4</sup> Details of *Swedana-karma* are available in *Charak-Samhita Sutrasthan-14*, *Sushrut-Samhita Chikitsa-sthan-32*, *Ashtanga-Samgraha Sutrasthan-26* and *Ashtanga-Hridaya Sutrasthan-17* and in other classics of Ayurveda also. It includes the definition, types, materials and methods being used, indications, contra-indications, signs and symptoms of proper fomentation, signs

and symptoms of excessive fomentation and its treatment, and special care in administration of *Swedana-karma*. The entire procedure has been described scientifically. This review article mainly deals with the concept of *Swedana-karma* as per the detail available in Ayurveda.

## Concept of Swedana-Karma

The basic aim of *Snehana* and *Swedana-karma* is to bring forth the vitiated *doshas* to an elimination form from their previous latent state.<sup>5</sup> These are generally performed before application of *Panchakarma*. This type of *Swedana-karma* is said to be the *purvakarma* of *shodhan*. On the other hand, it is used as an independent therapy also to pacify *Vataja*, *Kaphaja* and *Vata-Kaphaja rogas* (diseases) which are curable by *Swedana* and it comes under the heading *shaman* type of *Swedana*. The concept of *Swedana-karma* not only includes the appearance of sweating but it is administered until the relief from cold, pain, stiffness and heaviness of the body and softness of the body parts.<sup>6</sup> It is considered the best among those which produce softness of the body parts.<sup>7</sup> It liquefies the *dosha* and *mala* due to its hot and sharp attributes, bring it to the part from where it is eliminated which causes the cleansing of the *srotas* (body channels),

\*Assistant Professor, Deptt. of Samhita and Sanskrit, Faculty of Ayurveda, IMS, BHU, Varanasi.

E-mail Id: murlipaliwal@yahoo.com

lightness and maintains the normal temperature. The exact concept of *Swedana* cannot be understood until and unless we discuss the different approaches of the same. For instance, *snigdha-sweda* cannot be given in persons suffering from *Kaphaja roga* and *Ama-dosha* where as *ruksha-sweda* is applicable, *ruksha-sweda* cannot be administered in *Vatik-rogas*, *Tapa* and *Ushma-sweda* is not indicated in association of *Pitta dosha* but *Drava-sweda* can be administered, *Sankar-sweda*, *Nadi-sweda* are given for local fomentation where as *Jentak-sweda*, *Prastar-sweda*, *Ashmaghan-sweda*, *Kuti-sweda*, *Bhu-sweda*, *Karshu-sweda*, *Kumbhi-sweda*, *Kupa-sweda* and *Holak-sweda* are advised for general fomentation. *Swedana* is of non-thermal type also and advised in different conditions such as heavy clothing and fasting in fever, *Vyayam* for obese, *Atap-sevan* (exposure to sun) and *ushma-sadan* (heated chamber) for those suffering from cold, *Ahava* (wrestling) and *vyayam* (exercise) for those suffering from increased *Meda* and *Kapha*. *Swedana* is advised considering many factors like disease, season, diseased person, nature of *sweda*, proper drugs and proper place.<sup>8</sup> In diseases due to cold and strong persons, strong fomentation is prescribed. In weak and medium persons, it should be mild and medium respectively. In case of *Vata* located in *Amashaya* and *Kapha* located in *Pakwashaya*, fomentation should be followed by rough and unctuous measures respectively. Testicles, heart and eyes should not be fomented or should be mildly fomented. In groins medium type of fomentation may be applied. In remaining parts of the body, *Swedana* can be applied as required.<sup>9</sup> *Swedana* should be done with the substances suitable for particular disease after oleation therapy. *Ruksha-sweda* advised in *Amavat roga* is not done after oleation therapy. It should be administered in a specific chamber which is free from excessive wind and pollution. If *Dosha* is localized in a particular part of the body then local fomentation should be given but when it has been spread all over the body, only general fomentation will serve the purpose. After *Swedana-karma* a patient should take wholesome diet and avoid exercise and other activities which cause exertion.<sup>10</sup> Hence multiple factors are considerable before administration of *Swedana* for desired results.

### Classification of *Swedana*

*Acharya Charak* has divided *Swedana* on the base of three different approaches. *Sagni* (thermal fomentation) and *niragni* (non-thermal fomentation) on the base of presence and absence of fire, *Ruksha* (dry) and *snigdha* (unctuous) *Swedana* on the base of materials being used and *Ekanga* (local fomentation) and *sarvanga* (general fomentation) on

the base of area of application. He has discussed thirteen types of *Sagni-sweda*. These are as follows-

1. *Sankara-sweda* (mixed fomentation)
2. *Prastar-sweda* (hot-bed fomentation)
3. *Nadi-sweda* (steam kettle fomentation)
4. *Parishek-sweda* (afflusion fomentation)
5. *Avagahan-sweda* (bath sudation)
6. *Jentak-sweda* (sudatorium sudation)
7. *Ashmaghan-sweda* (stone-bed fomentation)
8. *Karshu-sweda* (trench fomentation)
9. *Kuti-sweda* (cabin fomentation)
10. *Bhu-sweda* (ground-bed fomentation)
11. *Kumbhi-sweda* (pitcher-bed fomentation)
12. *Kupa-sweda* (pit fomentation)
13. *Holak-sweda* (under-bed fomentation)<sup>11</sup>

*Acharya Charaka* has discussed about ten types of *niragni-sweda* also, which are as follows:

1. *Vyayama* (Exercise)
2. *Ushnasadan* (residing in warm chamber)
3. *Gurupravarana* (heavy clothing)
4. *Kshudha* (Hunger)
5. *Bahupan* (Excessive drinking)
6. *Bhaya* (fear)
7. *Krodha* (anger)
8. *Upanah* (application of poultice)
9. *Ahava* (wrestling)
10. *Atap* (exposure to sunshine)<sup>12</sup>

*Acharya Sushruta* has enumerated four types of *swedas* viz. *Tapa-sweda*, *Ushma-sweda*, *Upanah-sweda* and *Drava-sweda* and stated that all the *swedas* can be included under these four categories.<sup>13</sup> *Dalhana*, the commentator of *Sushruta-Samhita*, stated that *Charakokta* thirteen types can be included in these four types. He says that *Jentak-sweda*, *Karshu-sweda*, *Kuti-sweda*, *Kupa-sweda*, *Holak-sweda* can be included in *Tapa-sweda*, *Sankar-sweda*, *Prastar-sweda*, *Ashmaghan-sweda*, *Nadi-sweda*, *Kumbhi-sweda* and *Bhu-sweda* can be included in *Ushma-sweda*, *Parishek-sweda* and *Avagah-sweda* can be included in *Drava-sweda*.<sup>13</sup> *Acharya Sushruta* has stated that *Tapa* and *Ushma-sweda* pacify *Kapha dosha*, *Upanah-sweda* pacifies *Vata-dosha* and *Drava-sweda* is advised where *Pitta-dosha* is associated with *Vata* or *Kapha dosha*, *Swedana* by Heavy clothings, exercise, basking in the sun, wrestling etc. is advised where *Vata* is associated with *Kapha-dosha* and *Medo-dhatu*.<sup>14</sup> *Acharya Vriddha Vagbhata* has also enumerated four types of *swedas* similar to *Acharya Sushruta* but he has discussed eight types of *Ushma-sweda* which includes *Kupa-sweda*, *Kuti-sweda* and *Jentak-sweda* also. He has discussed eleven types of *Niragni-sweda* (non-thermal fomentation) viz. *Nivat-sadan* (residing in windless compartment),

*Gurupravarana* (heavy clothings), *Muhurmuha madyapan* (frequent alcoholic drinks), *Vyayam* (exercise), *kshudha* (hunger), *Atap-sevan* (exposure to sun shine), *Niyuddha* (wrestling), *adhva* (wayfaring), *Bharharan* (to carry heavy loads), *Amarsh* (anger) and *bhaya* (fear).<sup>15</sup> Acharya Vagbhata has discussed four types of *Sagni-sweda* similar to Acharya Sushruta. He has discussed ten types of *niragni-swedas* with minor difference from Charak's view. Vagbhata has enumerated *Nivat-griha* at the place of *Ushna-sadan* and *Ayasa* at the place of *Vyayam* in *Niragni-sweda*.<sup>16</sup> Acharya Kashyap has propounded eight types of *swedas* viz. *Hasta-sweda* (fomentation by warm hand), *Pradeha* (to anoint), *Nadi-sweda*, *Prastar-sweda*, *Sankar-sweda*, *Upanah-sweda*, *Avagah-sweda* and *Parishek-sweda*.<sup>17</sup>

### Indications of Swedana-Karma

*Swedana-karma* is advised in *Pratishyaya* (coryza), cough, hiccup, dyspnea, heaviness of the body, pain in the ear, neck, and head, hoarseness of voice, spasmodic obstruction in the throat, paralysis of the face, one limb, whole body or half of the body, bending of the body, distension of the abdomen, constipation, suppression of urine, yawning, stiffness of the sides, back, waist and abdomen, sciatica, dysuria, enlargement of scrotum, malaise, pain and stiffness of feet, knee, calf, oedema, neuralgia of extremities, diseases due to impaired digestion and metabolism, in chill, shivering, affliction of ankle joint by *Vata*, in contraction, extension or colic pain, stiffness, excessive heaviness, numbness and in diseases affecting the whole body.<sup>18</sup>

### Contra-Indications of Swedana-Karma

The physician should not administer fomentation therapy to those who have taken too much astringents and alcohol, the pregnant woman, in *Raktapitta* (disease characterized by bleeding from different orifices of the body), diarrhea, *Paittika* type of obstinate urinary disorder specially diabetes mellitus, inflammation and prolapsed of rectum, toxic conditions, alcoholism, those having *Paittika* constitution and dry skin, those who are fatigued, unconscious, fatty, thirsty, hungry, in a fit of anger and anxiety, jaundice, abdominal disease, consumption, *Vatarakta* (gout), those who are weak and dried up and whose *ojas* has been reduced in the body and in *Timir-roga*.<sup>19</sup>

### Discussion

While we discuss the meaning of the term *sweda*, it gives mainly two meaning i.e. to cook and to

foment. Where we are talking in the context of cooking, the first meaning should be taken e.g. *Swinna-Tandula* (cooked rice) but while we are discussing a therapy, the second meaning i.e. fomentation should be taken. The terms *Swedana-dravya* and *swedopag-dravya* are different and needs exposition. *Swedana-dravyas* are those which are mainly responsible for *Swedana* where as *swedopag-dravyas* (*Shobhanjan*, *Eranda*, *Arka* etc.) are the adjuvant in *Swedana-karma*. A question comes that whether *Swedana* is always used before *shodhan* and *shaman chikitsa* or somewhere else? Acharya Sushruta has clarified this issue in a scientific way. He says that Fomentation is applied before *Nasya-karma* (Head evacuative therapy), *Basti-karma* (enema therapy) and *shodhan-karma* (purification procedures), after the removal of foreign bodies, *Mudhagarbha* having no complications and normal delivery and before and after in case of fistula in ano, piles and calculus.<sup>20</sup> *Swedana* is indicated in the state of *Ama-dosha* in *Charak-Samhita* where as in *Ashtang-Samgraha* and *Ashtang-Hridaya* it is indicated when previous food is digested. Now what to do? This problem can be solved by considering two types of *sweda* i.e. *samshaman sweda* (fomentation for alleviation purpose) and *samshodhanartha sweda* (fomentation for purification purpose). *Samshaman* type of *sweda* can be given in the state of *Ama-dosha* what Charak has suggested and the *sweda* which is being given for *samshodhan* purpose, be given when previous meal is digested as suggested by the authors of *Ashtang-Samgraha* and *Ashtang-Hridaya*. Therefore there is no contradiction between Acharya Charak and other authors. Generally *Snehana* and *Swedana* before *Panchakarma* are suggested to administer to bring forth the vitiated *dosha* in the elimination form. If this situation takes place without *Snehana* and *Swedana* in a person who is having vitiated *doshas* in excess, then without *Snehana* and *Swedana*, a physician can advise for *Vaman* etc. procedures. Softness of the body parts takes place when *Swedana* is applied after proper internal and external *Snehana* (oleation). Indications and contra-indications are given by all the scholars of Ayurveda, yet the stage of the disease, place and season should be considered very sincerely as *Swedana* being administered in winter cannot be given as it is in summer in same condition of disease. Therefore all the factors which influence the efficacy should be considered sincerely. Various types of bed or pit or cabin are discussed in Ayurvedic classics under the material and methods of *Swedana-karma*, which has been changed according to the need and technological advancements of present scenario. Nowadays different types of *Swedana* boxes are available in

which either steam of the medicinal decoction or electric bulbs are used to produce heat for fomentation. Resources available in ancient period may not be available in present, similarly conditions laid down in *Jentak-sweda* may not be feasible for each and every one in present, therefore modification or way of application may be different keeping in view the target of *Swedana* and ultimately relief to the patient.

## Conclusion

*Swedana-karma* is one of the most useful therapeutic procedures being practiced in Ayurveda since long back. It causes relief in pain, stiffness, heaviness and many other diseases if properly administered. Its area and scopes are very much wide due to multidimensional approach. It is administered as a *shaman-chikitsa* as well as before *shodhan-chikitsa*. All the scholars of Ayurveda discussed this procedure which shows the gravity and utility of the concept. Its ultimate aim is to foment either by thermal techniques or non-thermal, either by ununctuous material or by unctuous materials and so on. It can be applied to a particular part of the body as well as whole body. It is beneficial in *Vata-Kaphaja rogas* mainly. The materials and technology in application of *Swedana* is not constant, it may be changed according to need and advancements, but the concept of *Swedana* never changes.

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