

PART ONE

The Marma Points: Charting the Course for Abhyanga

Ayurvedic massage is based on the knowledge of the marma points, the vital points of the body where structures pulsate and pain exists. Marmas, or reflex anatomical sites, are also called the junctions of prana by Sushruta. Knowledge of marma points was culled in ancient India from the Atharva Veda. During Vedic times, the knowledge of these vital points was widely used to fatally wound opponents in war, to save lives through surgery, to revitalize the body through abhyanga therapy, to strengthen the body through martial arts, and to stimulate, repair and heal these vital points through Ayurvedic acupuncture.

The body consists of thousands of marma points, with 365 essential points, 43 of which are the ones most commonly treated. Some points are more important than others, with 107 points being lethal if a blow to one of them is received.

Marma points are also defined as the junction where flesh, veins, arteries, tendons, bones and joints meet. These points are connected like a rosary by a common thread or subtle channel, nadi. Marmas are vitalized by the pranic energy carried to them via these subtle channels. Most nadis exist deep within the tissues of the body, occasionally traveling towards the body's surfaces.

Although the massage techniques given at the end of this chapter stimulate the main marmas and circulatory channels, only a cursory description and graphing of them are given. The directions given here are elementary, but are sufficient for the general application of massage and as a preliminary procedure before pancha karma.

In abhyanga therapy, a basic knowledge of marmas, nadis and the circulatory systems is important. Massage acts directly on blood, nerves, and lymph circulatory systems. The lymph system, operating through ducts, nodes and passages, does not have capillaries to carry its fluids independently as does the blood system. The lymph system's function is to supplement blood circulation. Further, the lymph system serves as a reservoir for muscles to float in. Its lymph nodes assist blood circulation by draining excess fluids from the blood stream, thus easing the labors of the heart. They also provide the body with its direct line of defense against disease. By stimulating the lymph nodes, massage therapy, especially when performed with warm oil or substances, serves to cleanse and revitalize the body.

There are three main types of massage techniques in abhyanga therapy:

active, passive and persuasive. In active massage, strong pressure is applied; in passive massage, delicate stroking is performed; in persuasive massage, the technique of pinching or kneading the small muscles between the thumb and forefinger is used. Generally, Vata and Pitta conditions are treated with a combination of active and passive massage, while Kapha conditions are treated with a combination of active and persuasive massage.

The head, face, neck, shoulders and upper chest are massaged first in abhyanga therapy; the general flow of massage then moves to the soles of the feet and continues upward towards the heart, unless a cold massage is being administered. In this event, the stroking begins on the head and continues steadily downward. Massaging the body from the soles of the feet upward activates the veins and carries the impure blood to the heart for purification. The revitalized blood is then distributed via the arteries throughout the body.

Generally, abhyanga is applied with warm substances. Occasionally, however, a cooling substance may be used for Pitta conditions. A panoply of massaging oils, aromatic oils, fragrant powders and bean and grain flour mixtures, called *ubtans*, are used to facilitate smoothness or light friction.

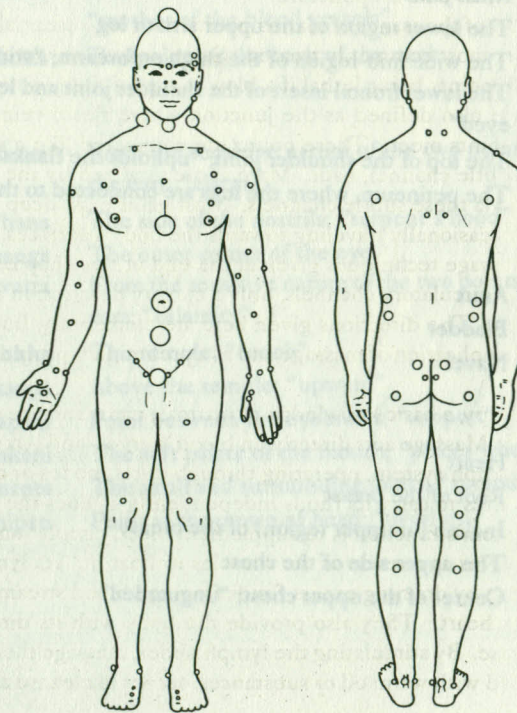


Figure 1: Main Marma Points on the Body

Forty-three Commonly Treated Marma Points

The marma points are named after their location or function in the body.

Arms and Legs:

Talahridaya	The center, or "heart," of the palm of the hand or the sole of the foot
Kshipram	Area between the thumb and forefinger on the hand or between the big toe and fore-toe on the bottom of the foot; "quickness"
Kurcha	The bundle of muscles or tendons at the base of the thumb or big toe
Kurchasira	The base of the hand or the foot; "head of kurcha"
Manibandhi	The four points around the wrist; "bracelet"
Gulpha	Ankle joint
Indravasti	Mid-forearm and mid-calf; "Indra's bladder"
Kurpara	Elbow joint
Janu	Knee joint
Ani	The lower region of the upper arm or leg
Urvi	The wide mid-region of the thigh or forearm; "wide"
Lohitaksha	The lower frontal insert of the shoulder joint and leg joint; "red eyed"
Kaksadhara	The top of the shoulder joint; "upholds the flanks"
Vitapa	The perineum, where the legs are connected to the trunk

Abdomen:

Guda	Anus
Vasti	Bladder
Nabhi	Navel

Thorax:

Hridaya	Heart
Stanamula	Root of the breast
Stanarohita	Incline (or upper region) of the breast
Apastambha	The upper side of the chest
Apalapa	Center of the upper chest; "unguarded"

Back:

Katikataruna	The center of the buttocks; "what arises from the sacrum"
Kukundara	On either side of the posterior superior iliac spine; "marking the loins"
Nitamba	The upper regions of the buttocks
Parsvasandhi	The sides of the waist; "joint of the sides"
Vrihati	The broad region of the back; "large"
Amsaphalaka	The shoulder blade
Amsa	The shoulder

Neck:

Manya	Perhaps owing to its connection with udana air which controls the voice; "honor"
Nila	From the color of the veins at the two points at the base of the neck; "dark blue"
Sira Matrika	From the arteries to the head that flow through this region; "mother of the blood vessels"
Krikatika	Two points at the back of the neck

Head:

Vidhuram	From the sensitive nature of the two points below the back of the ears; "alarm"
Phana	The side of the nostrils; "serpent's hood"
Apanga	The outer corner of the eye
Avarta	From the sensitive nature of the two points directly behind the ears; "calamity"
Sankha	The temple; "conch"
Utksepa	Above the temple; "upward"
Sthapani	Point between the eyebrows; "support"
Sringatakani	The soft palate of the mouth; "places where four roads meet"
Simanta	The skull and surrounding joints; "summit"
Adhipati	Point at the crown of head; "overlord"