



UDVARTANA KARMA IN AYURVEDA: A NARRATIVE REVIEW OF CLASSICAL CONCEPTS AND THERAPEUTIC APPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT Udvartana also known as Mruja and Gatra Mardana, can be defined as the process of rubbing medicated powder over the body parts in Pratiloma Gati (~opposite to the hair root direction) with required pressure and required time. It is traditionally described for the management of Kapha and Meda related conditions and also is a part of Dinacharya and Ritucharya. A narrative literature review was conducted to compile and critically synthesize the available classical Ayurveda literature. Classical Ayurveda texts, including Brihat-trayi (~the great triad) and Laghu-trai (~the lesser triad) were reviewed to identify references pertaining to the types, indications, contraindications, procedure, therapeutic effects and probable mode of action of Udvartana. The review identified various varied descriptions of Udvartana in classical Ayurveda literature. The review highlights the broad therapeutic relevance of Udvartana and the need for systematic understanding and standardization of its practice in contemporary clinical settings.

KEYWORDS : Udvartana, Udgharshana, Utsadana, Panchakarma, Ayurveda, Powder massage

INTRODUCTION

In Ayurveda, Chikitsa (~treatments) is classified into three – Antharparimarjana (~internal), Bahirparimarjana (~external) and Sastrapranidhana (~surgical). In Dinacharya (~daily regimen) and Ritucharya (~seasonal regimen), different types of Bahirparimarjana karmas are explained, including Abhyanga, Mardana, Padaghata, Udvartana, and Utsadana. Each of these techniques can have different modes of action based on the specific methods and formulations used. Udvartana (rubbing body with herbal powders) is one important procedure among them and it is a Rukshana Karma (~procedure inducing dryness). It is a procedure in Ayurveda, in which dry powders of medicines are used to rub the body in a centripetal direction. Udvartana helps in alleviation of Kapha Dosa (~phlegmatic humour) and liquefies the Meda (~body fat). It gives firmness to the body, smoothness to skin and increase in complexion.

METHODS

A narrative literature review was conducted to compile and critically synthesize the available classical Ayurveda literature. Classical Ayurveda texts, including Brihat-trayi (~the great triad) and Laghu-trai (~the lesser triad) were reviewed to identify references pertaining to the types, indications, contraindications, procedure, therapeutic effects and probable mode of action of Udvartana. Relevant commentaries and authoritative Ayurveda texts were also consulted for clarification and interpretation of classical concepts. The relevant textual references were compiled, compared across different classical sources and thematically organised to provide a comprehensive understanding of the classical concepts and therapeutic principles of Udvartana.

RESULTS

Definition and Concept of Udvartana

According to Vachaspathyam, the word Udvartana is derived from the root 'ud' and 'vrut'. The term Udvartana can be split as 'Urdhva' and 'Vartana', 'Urdhva' means to go up or rise or ascend and together with 'Vartana' it means upward moving massage.¹ Amarakosha defines Udvartana as Aplava (~dry/ without water) and also mentions the term Udvartana and Utsadana are synonymous.² According to Ayurveda Sabda Kosha, Udvartana is a procedure in which the skin is rubbed (Twak Gharshana) with Amalakyadi Churna and is done before bath.³ Acharya Chakrapani while commentating on the Charaka Samhita, defines Udvartana as to move in upward direction (Urdhwa Vartanam)⁴, karma which is done after Abhyanga (Abhyanga Purvaka)⁵ and the procedure done for the purpose of removing the morbid matter from the body (Sharira Parimarjana)⁵. Acharya Dalhana while commentating on Susruta Samhita, defines Udvartana as body massage (Gatra Mardanam) and is nothing but Utsadana.⁶ According to Hemadri, Udvartana is a procedure that involves massaging the body (Gatra Karshana) performed with powders (Churnas) of Kashaya Dravyas (~drugs with astringent taste).⁷ Udvartana also known as Mruja and Gatra Mardana, can be defined as the process of rubbing medicated powder over the body parts in Pratiloma Gati (~opposite to the hair root direction) with required pressure and required time.⁸

Synonyms and Terminology

The different word meanings of the term Udvartana are rubbing, kneading, the act of raising, going up, ascending, grinding, pounding, causing, to shuffle and to smearing with fragrant powder.⁹ While explaining the Nidana (~etiology) of Prameha (~urinary disorders including Diabetes), Acharya Chakrapani quoted the meaning of the term 'Mruja' is Udvartana.⁸ According to Acharya Dalhana, Utsadana is another name for Udvartana.⁶ Twak gharshana is mentioned as a synonym for Udvartana, according to Ayurveda Sabda Kosha.³

Classifications of Udvartana

Based on the drugs used, therapeutic purpose and method of application, different Ayurvedic classics describe various classifications of Udvartana. According to Acharya Charaka, Udvartana can be broadly divided into Ruksha Udvartana¹⁰ (~rubbing of dry herbal powders), indicated for Sthaulya (~obesity) in which Ruksha Churna Dravyas (~dry herbal powders) are used and Snigdha Udvartana¹¹ (~rubbing of wet herbal powders), indicated for Karshya (~emaciation) in which Sneha-Kalka Dravyas (~paste made by mixing fats and powders) are used. Charaka also mentions Gadha Udvartana¹² (~deep) for the management of Prameha and Anavagadha Udvartana (~superficial), based on the intensity of pressure applied during the procedure. Utsadana and Udgharshana are the two varieties of Udvartana, mentioned by Acharya Dalhana while commentating the Susruta Samhita.¹³ Massaging the body with herbal powders mixed with Sneha (~fat) or other Dravadravyas is called Utsadana. Utsadana helps in opening of the orifices of the veins (blood vessels) and causes Dipana (stimulation) of the Bhrajaka Anala (~fire associated with skin metabolism and complexion) present in the skin. In women, especially Utsadana bestows brilliance to their appearance, more of joy, auspiciousness, cleanliness, feeling of lightness and such other beneficial qualities.¹³ Acharya Dalhana says that rubbing the body with dry herbal powders (Churnas) without mixing oil or other Dravadravyas (~liquids) is called Udgharshana. Udgharshana is hard dry massage and is generally done with Ruksha Dravyas like Ishtika Churna (~brick powder), Phenaka Churna (~powder of cuttlefish bone), etc. This hard massage dispels itching, eruptions and disorders of Vata.¹³ Use of Phenaka for Udgharshana brings about stability and lightness to the thigh region and mitigates itching, rashes, Stambha (~stagnation) of Vata and wards off dirt and diseases.¹⁴ Udgharshana with Ishtika Churna, increases the Bhrajaka Pitta, widens the orifices of veins (blood vessels) and cures itching and rashes.¹⁵ Yogaratnakara further describes Mukha Udvartana, a specialized form of Udvartana intended for facial care and enhancement of complexion.¹⁶

Indications of Udvartana

a) Udvartana in Swastha

I) Udvartana in Dinacharya: In context of Matrashiteeya Adhyaya of Charaka Samhita Sutrasthana, the concept of Shariraparimarjana is explained, which is a synonym of Udvartana as mentioned by the commentator Chakrapani. It is defined as a procedure which is performed

after abhyanga in a direction opposite to hair follicles.⁵ In Susruta Samhita it is explained in Anagadhabadapratisheda Adhyaya of Chikitsasthana⁶, while in Ashtanga Hridaya⁷ and Ashtanga San-graha¹⁶, Udvartana is explained under Dinacharya Adhyaya of Sutrasthana and the procedure is advised after Abhyanga and Vyayama, follo-wed by Snana. Udvartana is included in the Abhyangadividhi Snanam of Yogaratnakara¹⁷ and Bhava Prakasha¹⁸.

ii) Udvartana in Ritucharya: In Charaka Samhita Sutrasthana Tasyashiteeya Adhyaya, Utsadana is indicated in Hemanta Ritucharya.¹⁹ In the context of Hemantha, Shishira and Vasanta Ritucharya, Acharya Vagbhata in Ashtanga Sangraha describes Udvartana²⁰ while in Ashtanga Hridaya, it is mentioned only in Vasantha Rithucharya along with other Kaphaharavidhis like Tikshna Vamana, Vyayama, etc.²¹

iii) Udvartana in Rasayana Prayoga: In context of Triphala Rasayana in Ashtanga Sangraha, Dwiguna Parihara Kala is indicated where the person has to follow diet of Yavagu, Yusha prepared with Shashtika Shali, Ghrita and Ksheera and must follow Vihara like Abhyanga with Ghrita followed by Udvartana with Yava Churna.²²

b) Udvartana in Atura

I) General Indications of Udvartana: Udvartana is generally indicated for Kapha Dosa and it is Medahara.⁷ According to Susruta, Udvartana is primarily Vatahara and it alleviates skin manifestations like Kandu and Koda.¹³ The indications for Rukshana can be taken as the general indications of Udvartana as it is a Rukshana Karma. Rukshana Karma is defined as the therapy which brings about Rukshata (dryness), Kharatva (roughness) and Vaishadya (clear the sliminess) to the body.²³ Ruksha Dravyas are having the qualities of Ruksha, Laghu, Khara, Tikshna, Ushna, Sthira, Apichila and Kathina²⁴ and are predominant with Vayu and Tejo Mahabhuta. Rukshana therapies are indicated in the condition where there is increased state of Abhish-yanda Guna, Maha Dosa (excessively increased Dosa), Marmastha Vyadhi and Urust-ambha.²⁵ Vagbhata in Ashtanga Hridaya Sutrasthana Snehadhyaya, mentions the indications of Rukshana as Mamsala (fleshy), Medura (corpulent), Bhuri Sleshmala (having excess Kapha) and those with Vishamaagni (irregular Agni).²⁶ In Rajavallabha Nighantu, Udvartana with Haridra and Tila are mentioned and it is indicated in conditions like itching, discolouration and dryness of skin and skin diseases in general.²⁷

ii) Specific Indications of Udvartana: Udvartana is indicated in a wide range of diseases and conditions, particularly those characterized by kapha and meda. Classical Ayurveda texts recommend Udvartana for specific disease conditions which are mentioned below.

Table 1: Specific Indications of Udvartana

Grantha	Adhyaya	Indications
Charaka Samhita Sutrasthana	Ashtauninditeeya Adhyaya	Ruksha Udvartana in Sthaulya ²⁸
Charaka Samhita Sutrasthana	Ashtauninditeeya Adhyaya	Snigdha Udvartana in Karshya ²⁹
Charaka Samhita Sutrasthana	Santarpiniya Adhyaya	Udvartana and Udgharshana with Musta, Aragvadha, Devadaru, Nimba, Khadira, Vatsaka etc. for Twak Dosh in Ati Santarpita Purusha ³⁰
Charaka Samhita Chikitsasthana	Rajayakshma Chikitsita	Utsadana with paste of Makshika mixed with Jeevantyadi gana and Yava Churna for Pushti, Varna and Bala ³¹
Charaka Samhita Chikitsasthana	Prameha Chikitsita	Ruksha Gadhra Udvartana using drugs which are Kapha-Medohara ³²
Charaka Samhita Chikitsasthana	Kushta Chikitsita	Udvartana with Chakramarda, Sarjarasa, Mulakabeeja added with Kanji in Sidhma Kushta ³³
Charaka Samhita Chikitsasthana	Unmada Chikitsa	Use of Siddharthakadi Agada for Udvartana ³⁴
Charaka Samhita Chikitsasthana	Visha Chikitsa	Abhyanga with Ghrita and Lavana followed by Udvartana with paste of warm water and sand in Uchchitinga Visha ³⁵
Susruta Samhita Sutrasthana	Jalukavacharaniya	Sthanika Udvartana or Gharshana with Mrit-Gomaya Churna before Jalukavacharana ³⁶

Susruta Samhita Chikitsasthana	Swabhavavyadhi Pratishedaniya	Yavapishta is used for Udvartana in Kutipravesika Rasayana ³⁷
Susruta Samhita Chikitsasthana	Mudhagarbha Chikitsita	Udvartana for Utthanikarana of Avangmukha Mudhagarbha ³⁸
Susruta Samhita Uttaratanttra	Sosha Pratisheda	Utsadana with Ashwagandha, Yava, Punarnava ³⁹
Ashtanga Sangraha Sutrasthana	Matrasheetiya	Udvartana with amla dravya mixed with churna of Twak, Patra, Rasna, Agar, Shigru, Kushta, Vacha and Shatahva in Vishuchika ⁴⁰
Ashtanga Sangraha Sutrasthana	Agrasan-grahaniya	Udvartana considered as Shreshta (~best) for Anna Shraddha Janana ⁴¹
Ashtanga Sangraha Sharirasthana	Garbhopacharaniya	Udvartana to prevent Kikkisa (Kandu) during the 7 th month of pregnancy ⁴²
Ashtanga Sangraha Uttaratanttra	Apasmara Pratisheda	Udvartana with burnt ashes of Kharasthi, Hasti Nakha, Gopucch Roma / Basta Roma mixed with Mutra ⁴³

Contraindications of Udvartana

The contraindications for Udvartana are not mentioned in the classical texts. Being a Ruksha Chikitsa, avoid Udvartana in conditions primarily dominated by Vata Dosa (Kevala Vata Rogas). It should be avoided in patients with severe debility or emaciation, recent trauma or fractures, active bleeding disorders, open wounds, burns, ulcers, contagious skin diseases and other allergic reactions.

Assessment of Udvartana

The assessment criteria for Udvartana are not mentioned in the classics. But as it is one among the Rukshana Karma, the Samyakyoga (~proper effect), Atiyoga (~excessive effect) and Ayoga (~inadequate effect) Lakshanas (~symptoms) of Udvartana are same as that of Rukshana (Langhana). The Samyakyoga Lakshanas include Vata-Mutra-Purisha Visarga (~elimination of flatus-urine-faeces), Gatra Laghava (~lightness in body), Hridaya-Udgara-Kantha-Asya Sudhi (~feeling of clearness of chest, eructation, throat and mouth), Gata Tantra-Klama (~disappearance of drowsiness and exhaustion), Sweda (~perspiration), Jate ruchi (~feeling of proper taste), Kshut-Pipasa Sahodaya (~appearance of hunger along with thirst) and Nirvyatha Antaratma (~feeling of well-being).⁴⁵ Parvabheda (~pain in joints), Angamarda (~body ache), Kasa (~cough), Mukhasosha (~dryness of mouth), Trishna (~feeling of thirst), Khutpranasha (~loss of hunger), Aruchi (~anorexia), Shrotra-Netra Daurbalya (~weakness of hearing and vision), Manasambhrama (~fainting and confusion in mind), Urdhwavata Abhikshana (~frequent upward movement of Vata), Tamo Hridi (~delusion) and Deha-Agni-Bala Nasha (~loss of body weight, digestive fire and strength) are the Atiyoga Lakshanas⁴⁶ while Dosa Ashama (~dosa remained as it is) and Roga Vriddhi (~aggravation of disease) are the Ayoga Lakshanas⁴⁷.

Benefits of Udvartana

The benefits of Udvartana include Daurgandhyahara (~evacuation of bad body odour), Gauravahara (~alleviating heaviness), Tantrahara (~reduces drowsiness), Kanduhara (~reducing itching), Malahara (~eliminating skin toxins), Aruchihara (~alleviating anorexia), Swedabibhatsatahara (~reduces discomforts associated with sweating), Vatahara (~alleviating Vata Dosa), Kaphavilayana (~causes liquefaction of Kapha Dosa), Medovilayana (~causes liquefaction of Medas), Angasthirikarana (~bestows body stability), Twakprasadakara/ Kanthikara (~improves skin complexion), Siramukhaviviktavya (~increases circulation), Laghavakara (~causes lightness of body), Sukrada (~aphrodisiac), Balya (~provides strength), Shonitakrut (~haemopoietic), Raktaprasadakrut (~purifies the blood) and Twak Mriduta (~smoothens the skin).

Table 2: Benefits of Udvartana

Gunat	Charaka Samhita ⁵	Susruta Samhita ⁶	Ashtanga Hridaya ⁷ / Ashtanga Sangraha ¹⁶	Yogaratanakara ¹⁷ / Bhava Prakasha ¹⁸
Dourgandhyahara	+	-	-	-
Gauravahara	+	-	-	-
Tandrahara	+	-	-	-
Kanduhara	+	-	-	-
Malahara	+	-	-	-
Aruchihara	+	-	-	-

Swedabibhat-satahara	+	-	-	-
Vatahara	-	+	-	-
Kapha vilayana	-	+	-	-
Meda vilayana	-	+	+	-
Angasthirikarana	-	+	+	+
Tvakaprasadakara	-	+	+	+
Siramukhavivik-tavya	-	+	-	-
Laghavakara	-	+	-	-
Kaphahara	-	-	+	+
Medohara	-	-	-	+
Sukrada	-	-	-	+
Balya	-	-	-	+
Shonitakrut	-	-	-	+
Raktaprasadakrut	-	-	-	+
Kanthikara	-	-	-	+
Twak mrdutva	-	-	-	+

Probable Mode of Action of Udvartana

The mode of action of Bahya Upakramas is explained in the Susruta Samhita Sarirasthana Dhamanivyakarana Adhyaya. According to Susruta, Dhamanis (~major vessels/ channels) are classified into three groups, based on the direction which they travel- Urdwaga Dhamani (upward going vessels), Adhoga Dhamani (~downward going vessels) and Tiryagga Dhamani (~transversely going vessels).⁴⁸ The transversely running Tiryak Dhamanis are four in number. They divide repeatedly into hundreds and thousands of branches, forming an intricate network throughout the body. Their openings are situated at hair follicles and skin pores. Through these channels sweat is produced and excreted, thereby helping to regulate the body's temperature and maintain the normal condition of the skin. Since these channels are distributed throughout the skin, external therapies such as Abhyanga, Parisheka, Lepa, Udvartana and similar procedures exert their effects by acting through these Dhamanis. The substances applied externally are absorbed through the skin and influence the body through these channels, nourishing the tissues, promoting perspiration, improving circulation and restoring normal physiological functions. Due to strong massage pressure impact of Udvartana, the Virya (~potency) of the medicine goes into the body through the Tiryakgata Dhamanis, opens the channels, thereby causing the liquefaction of Kapha and Medas.⁴⁹

DISCUSSION

The classical literature describes Udvartana as an important external therapeutic procedure in which medicinal powders are applied and rubbed over the body with a therapeutic purpose. The term Udvartana itself indicates the characteristic manner of the procedure. It reflects the distinctive technique of rubbing the powder over the body, generally in an upward direction. This procedural aspect differentiates Udvartana from simple external application of powdered drugs. The descriptions available across the Ayurveda texts indicate that Udvartana is primarily associated with the management of conditions involving Kapha and Meda, while also being described as beneficial for improving lightness, stability and physical appearance. The consistency of these descriptions across different classical sources supports the importance of Udvartana as a distinct therapeutic procedure within the practice of Ayurveda.

The inclusion of Udvartana within the descriptions of Dinacharya and Ritucharya, highlights its importance not only as a therapeutic procedure, but also as a preventive and health-promoting practice in Ayurveda. The relevance of Udvartana may vary according to season, Dosa status and individual constitution and its application can therefore be understood within the broader Ayurveda principle of adapting lifestyle practices to changes in the environment and bodily state.

Classically, Udvartana is described in two forms- Udgharshana and Utsadana. The distinction between these two forms indicates that the choice of material and method of application can be adopted according to the intended therapeutic objective. Thus, the classical description demonstrates that Udvartana-related procedures encompass variations in both Dravya and therapeutic purpose, rather than representing a single uniform procedure.

The classical literature describes Udvartana as particularly useful in conditions involving Kapha and Meda aggravation. Its prominent indications include Sthaulya, Meda-related disorders, Kapha predominance, Gaurava (heaviness) and conditions associated with excessive unctuousness and accumulation of body fat. The procedure is also described as beneficial for promoting body firmness, lightness and improvement of skin complexion. These indications are consistent

with Ruksha, Laghu and Kaphahara properties attributed to Udvartana. In addition to its general indications, Udvartana is mentioned in specific therapeutic contexts in the management of certain diseases. These disease-specific applications are generally determined by the clinical presentation, Dosa involvement and therapeutic regimen in which Udvartana is incorporated. Therefore, such references represent context-specific indications rather than universal indications for the respective disorders. In contrast, specific contraindications for Udvartana are not explicitly and consistently described as a separate category in the classical texts reviewed. So generally it should be avoided or used cautiously in individuals with Vata dominance, excessive dryness, weakness or debility, as the Ruksha nature and friction of the procedure may aggravate Vata or further increase dryness. It should also be avoided in conditions where the skin is acutely affected, particularly when there are skin lesions, wounds or inflammatory conditions, depending on the clinical context.

The comparative analysis of classical Ayurveda literature demonstrates a distinct evolutionary trajectory in the understood benefits and therapeutic scope of Udvartana. In early foundational texts like Charaka Samhita, Udvartana is predominantly framed as a hygienic and cleansing procedure, focussing on the removal of external impurities, body odour, lethargy and skin irritations. Susruta Samhita expands this scope into systemic pathology, highlighting its capacity to open body channels, liquefy stagnant Kapha and Meda, pacify Vata and induce structural lightness. Building upon these principles, Ashtanga Sangraha and Ashtanga Hridaya emphasize structural firmness alongside skin rejuvenation. Notably, later compilations like Yogarat-nakara and Bhava Prakasha introduce a broader tissue-nourishing perspective, attributing deep rejuvenation, strength enhancement, blood-purifying properties and reproductive benefits for the therapy. Overall, this textual progression reveals how Udvartana evolved from a routine external cleansing protocol into a versatile systemic therapy capable of metabolic regulation, dermatological enhancement and tissue rejuvenation.

CONCLUSION

Udvartana is a distinctive external therapeutic procedure described in Ayurveda, with applications extending beyond its commonly recognized use in Sthaulya and Medo-related conditions. The classical literature describes its therapeutic utility in relation to its specific properties, method of application, materials used and clinical context. Its role is particularly relevant where Kapha-Meda predominance, heaviness, unctuousness and associated manifestations are present. In addition, Udvartana is also incorporated into the management of certain diseases as a component of specific therapeutic regimens, where its indications are determined by the clinical context rather than by the disease diagnosis alone. The diversity of classical descriptions highlights the need for systematic interpretation of its indications, procedural variations and therapeutic rationale. Contemporary clinical and experimental studies are required to further evaluate its efficacy, establish standardized procedural parameters, elucidate underlying mechanisms and facilitate evidence-based integration of Udvartana into clinical practice.

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