



AY:A2

OIL BATH MANIFESTO

Oil bath is abhyanga. The practice of self-massaging the body with oil.

Oil bath doesn't mean literally filling your bathtub with oil and soaking in it. THAT would be impractical. Oil bath is abhyanga. It is the practice of self-massaging the body with oil. And, while it may seem wildly impractical to incorporate it regularly into a busy life and a western bathroom, I am living proof that it IS possible! I'd like to share some things I have learned that have allowed me to get into a (near) daily habit of doing abhyanga as a means of radical self-care. It may not be easy at first, but it is far from impossible. With persistence and attentiveness, it becomes effortless. This video provides excellent instructions for how to perform abhyanga.

I told the story recently of how I first came into relationship with my vata-dominant constitution. In 2001 during massage school, I discovered and became interested in Ayurveda. I had a book by Vasant Lad that included a dosha self-assessment questionnaire. At that time, I was suffering from an eating disorder. The body dysmorphia and bias that accompanied my affliction informed my answers, and I determined myself to be a Kapha type, with some Pitta, and almost no perceivable Vata. This identity quickly solidified and I habitually sought out the foods, herbs, and activities that reduce Kapha, which generally increase Vata. You can imagine my astonishment when at my first meeting with Dr. Kumar in Mysore, 15 years later, he determined my constitution to be Vata > Pitta > Kapha. I didn't believe him at first. But as he responded with reasons he was, in fact, SURE of this, it started to make sense to me. It was jarring, to say the least. I thought I knew myself pretty well. But when I look back on all the years I spent drifting on chronically deranged vata, I can't deny that I would have really benefitted from some deep and profound grounding.

Daily life in the West can be vata aggravating for most anyone. Dr. Kumar offered me some very practical suggestions for grounding. These included introducing softness into my Ashtanga practice by moving a little more slowly, sweetly, and to finish, even lengthen, each exhalation. And he suggested daily abhyanga with sesame oil. His advice drew me into a deep curiosity about vata, and to finding out where it was showing up in my body-mind in ways I had previously overlooked and underappreciated. [Here is an excellent video with instructions on how to perform abhyanga.](#)

Vata is characterized qualitatively as light, crisp, cold, dry, mobile, irregular, rarified, rough. Excess vata in the mind is talkative, flighty, distractible, fickle-minded, ungrounded, forgetful, indecisive. For me, it took discovering and identifying the ways that excess vata shows up in my behavior and affects my wellbeing. In particular, I watch the ways it makes me seem closed off, and challenges my relationships. I look for the grounding effects of abhyanga in these areas. Some effects are subtle, and some more obvious. I am calmer. I am more inclined to make eye contact with others, and am more able to see and return their smiles, I am warmer, more friendly. My body also feels better, more comfortable. Abhyanga leaves me feeling insulated, swaddled, like my whole nervous system has been wrapped in a warm, cozy sweater.

Determine when you will do the oiling. As with any behavior we try to make a habit, it's better to work it out ahead of time. Since committing to daily abhyanga practice, I have found ways to make it happen. With all respect to the value of daily routines, my routine each day varies a little based on my schedule that day. I bring awareness to keeping my routines consistent week by week, and, so far, I think it's working for me. On the two mornings that I assist Angela in the Mysore room, I wake too early to do it before my shower. Instead, I do it when I return home after assisting. Then I shower and start my day again. On days I get to practice with the group, I wake a little extra early to give myself time to do the oiling before my shower. Then I proceed to practice.

These practices are especially deep and sweet! The body feels cared for, and I've been awake a little longer (*just be sure to wash the oil off very well - otherwise you'll be slippery. Also, you do not want to bring oil/herbal scents into the shala*). If my schedule varies in a way that prevents morning abhyanga, I do it in the evening before bed. I really believe that any amount of time spent oiling the body is so beneficial. Even if you just massage your neck and shoulders, or your feet before bed.

Designate a Mysore rug (*one that you'll miss practicing with the least*) for abhyanga. I keep one in the bathroom cupboard that gets spread out in the bottom of my bathtub like a napkin to catch any oil drips that fall, and to sit down on once I've done everything I can do standing. While seated, you can focus more attentively on massaging your joints, or you can simply rest, or do a seated meditation practice while the oil absorbs into your skin. You can wash the Mysore rug sometimes (*hang dry only! dryer = fire hazard*), and replace periodically. When you're done oiling, just fold it up and put it away before showering off. The rug will provide traction and insulation from the coolness of the tub, and it will make clean up easier. Some people keep a dish wand, with a handle that dispenses diluted dish soap, handy to cleanse oil from the tub with ease.

Sesame oil is especially nourishing and grounding. It is the oil I favor year round. I can personally recommend a few Banyan Botanicals sesame-based herbal oils that I use on my self and on my massage clients: **Mahanarayan oil** is excellent for easing soreness in the muscles and joints. I love it for cold winter months in general, and I use it on every body I massage. **Ashwagandha-Bala oil** feels strengthening and revitalizing. I use it on my elderly massage clients, and on people with muscle weakness. I sense intuitively that it does something to energize the neuro-muscular interface. **Bhringaraj oil** is wonderfully cooling, calming, and tranquilizing. I really appreciate its cooling effects during the hottest days of the late summer.

It is traditional, and is said to be very supportive of Ashtanga practice, to incorporate **castor oil** abhyanga once a week. Castor oil is intense! It's a thick, sticky, hard-to-remove mess. It is also a potent topical anti-inflammatory – among other mysterious things. Castor oil massage works deeply. It is said to be “mystifyingly” detoxifying. At the level of the gross body, the sticky texture provides a good amount of drag on the skin as you massage. This allows adhesions between the skin and underlying tissues to be gently released with ease. I won't speak directly to the effects at more subtle layers of being; that is for you to discover. It is said that while other oils can be left on the body to absorb throughout the day, castor oil should not be left on for more than one hour.

Castor oil is hard to remove. *Did I mention that?*

HERE ARE SOME TRIED AND TRUE METHODS FOR CLEANING UP:

Soap nut powder can be combined with water to make soap nut paste, which will take it off better than anything. Your best bet is to mix some of the powder with water in a squeeze bottle with an opening large enough to dispense it. Apply directly to the body, then spread around and gently scrub with your hands. For something more soothing for your skin, you can get Chana dal at the Indian grocery store and blend the dry legumes into a powder, mix with water, and make a paste. Apply in a similar way that you would soap nut paste to gently scrub off the castor oil. Dr. Bronners soaps are also good, though not perfect, for removing castor oil. I find it takes more than one pass to remove the sticky oil, and the soap can be drying. You might try massaging a layer of sesame or coconut oil over the layer of castor oil on your body to “dilute” it. It will then be easier to wash off with soap.

Not everyone may benefit as dramatically as I did by incorporating daily abhyanga. Much depends on your individual constitution. When in doubt, I check in with my vata. If I feel grounded and calm and warm, then maybe I can skip a day. If I feel the slightest need for support, I do abhyanga. I think that, just like with the yoga practice itself, we are naturally drawn into good habits when we take an interest in noticing and appreciating the positive effects of certain behaviors, and gradually, these behaviors start to stick.