

NOVA

KEEPING BODY AND SOUL TOGETHER

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Rosamund Burton speaks to a man who proves that blindness is no barrier in the deliciously soothing world of Indian Head Massage.

"You have to try this," my cousin tells me. We are at the Mind Body Spirit Festival in London and she indicates a stand, draped with beautiful Indian material, on which a small, stocky man is giving head massages. He is quietly spoken, says very little, and is blind. As he massages my head, which is a new sensation for me, I feel an amazing warmth, as if I am wrapped in a cocoon of comfort. Narendra Mehta has been completely blind since the age of one. Born near Bombay, he studied political science at Bombay University and had two career options. He could either become a lawyer or use his hands and do massage. He had learnt massage at the school for the blind he attended and had worked in a hospital massaging children with polio, meningitis and cerebral palsy, as it was found to be of great benefit to these conditions.

In the 1970's he went to England to study physiotherapy. After a month of being there, feeling very stressed, he wanted a head massaged but could not find anyone who provided that service. He had a full body massage instead, but the masseur did not touch his face or his head, and told him they were the domain of beauticians.

After six months, he left the physiotherapy course - it focused too much on machine based work and not enough on touch and manipulation for his liking - enrolled, instead, in a course to learn body massage. When he asked the tutor why a massage did not include the head, the response was, "If you massage someone's head, you can be sued. Having been given regular head massages in India " by his mother as a child, and then



receiving one whenever he went to the barber for a haircut or a shave, he was astonished to discover in the west there was a fear that head massage might adversely affect the brain.

"Head massage was not the done thing," he explains. "I was surprised because it is excellent for stress and stress-related symptoms, eye strain, tension headaches and anxiety. It helps depression and also sleep problems. Even after one massage you sleep very well, and a series of treatments are extremely beneficial for insomnia."

In India head massage has been practised for over a thousand years, and is an important part of family life, family members giving each other head massages on a weekly basis. It was originally developed by women to keep their hair in good condition. Head massage relieves tension in the scalp and helps the growth of hair follicles.

Women use oils such as sesame, coconut and almond to keep their hair strong and in good condition. The word 'shampoo' comes from the Indian word 'champi' meaning head massage.

Head massage can also help premature greyness, which is caused by not enough blood supply and thus nutrients reaching the scalp, usually due to stress. Often people go grey at the temples first, because, there is a lot of tension there. A head massage with sesame oil and sandalwood essential oil can relax the muscle and combat the grey hairs. For men starting to lose hair, a traditional treatment is to massage the head with coconut or sesame oil and amla, a fruit with 20 times more vitamin C than orange juice.

In 1978, Narendra returned to India to find out more about the practice. He visited centres, barbers, and families in city and rural areas from Calcutta to Bombay and discovered that the techniques varied from person to person.

"The barbers would concentrate on my scalp, while my mother and her women friends focused on treating the hair." He began to formalise what he was experiencing to discover what part of his body reacted most positively to which movements. He devised a therapy to bring the greatest relief to the many concentrated in the head.

"I added the neck, shoulders and upper arms to the head massage, because in the West there are a lot of shoulder problems, not to mention eye strain and neck and ear tension," he said.

Having developed the technique, which he calls Indian Champissage, he wanted to let people know about it, so in 1981 took a stand at the London Mind Body Spirit Festival. He has been a regular feature at that festival ever since. In 1995, he set up the London Centre of Indian Champissage International, and has since trained over 1,000 people. His constant development and refining of Indian Champissage has continued over the years and now includes energy healing and chakra balancing. The massage balances the three highest chakras in the body, the throat, the third eye and the crown, which, Narendra explains, "helps mental and emotional problems".

Narendra works very closely with his wife, Kundan.

"She is my eyes," he tells me. They met over 20 years ago through a friend in India.

"She wanted to marry someone who could not see, so she could be his eyes, so our common friend introduced us, and we clicked."

When I ask if they have any children, he says: "No. The head massage and face massage are our babies."

Kundan has developed what she calls facelift massage, which reduces bags under the eyes, and wrinkles, in addition to toning up the muscles of the face and jawline. It sounds so much more appealing than plastic surgery, botox and the standard face lift!

Narendra's presence at the Mind Body Spirit Festivals in Sydney and Brisbane at the beginning of May are part of his world tour. "I want to spread the word about this therapy as widely as possible, because it is so wonderful," he says. He adds that head massage is easy to learn, can be done on oneself, or by a partner, although it is most beneficial to see a trained therapist.

It's also remarkably practical, says this enthusiast: "The person doesn't have to undress, and no oils or creams are used, so it can be done in the office."

Some of his ex-students work for Virgin Airways, giving head massages to the first class passengers. Others go to computer companies, banks and law firms, and massage employees during their lunch hours. Sky Television have introduced head massage for their staff. "Journalists have lots of tension," he explains, "because of their deadlines." I can understand why, having spent a week trying to track this man down, and finally managing to contact him in Philadelphia, where he is currently giving workshops.

Narendra is author of Indian Head Massage and co-author with Kundan Mehta of Facelift Massage, which comes out in Australia in May. Narendra is at the Mind Body Spirit Sydney Festival, which runs from May 6 - 9 doing Indian Champissage and also lecturing on the subject.