



BODY BY ANNIRENE YANNI MASSAGING THE HARA

The body's center
is the key to
better health.

"Everything comes from the center and returns to the center. Center yourself on your breathing. Center yourself on your hara."

The first time someone told me to center myself on my hara I thought they were trying to introduce me to yet another exotic spiritual person who would lead me to love, light, and happiness—for a fee. In some ways they were, but I later discovered the person was me, and the hara is my own center of energy deep within my belly. In Oriental thought, the hara is the seat of human consciousness. It is the place where spirit becomes matter and matter becomes spirit in the continuous cycle of life. The hara contains our vitality, and the strength of our hara is an indication of how well we can unify body, mind, and spirit in our lives.

In Western terms, the hara is the abdominal cavity. It contains many of the internal organs and extends from the rib cage down to the hip bone. The center of the hara is a point on the midline of the front of the body between the two hip bones. It lies deep within the abdomen and is our center of physical gravity when standing, sitting, or kneeling. The center of the hara divides the vertical length of the body in half.

When teachers in dance classes, meditation classes, or yoga classes say to "center" ourselves, they mean to focus our concentration on that point. By doing so, we tap into the place from which all our vitality, action, thought, and understanding comes. The hara is the power behind the manifestation of our thoughts and dreams in the material world. Thus, a strong hara leads to appropriate action in the world.

The belief that a healthy mind and

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a healthy body are one is evident in both Western and Eastern points of view. Western medicine says it is important to keep the organs and the muscles in the abdomen toned for good health. Oriental medicine says the same, but adds to it the concept of energy and meridians (the paths through which energy flows in the body), and advises that keeping the abdominal energy strong and circulating will maintain health. With both these points of view in mind, let's take a look at how to keep a healthy abdomen, how to bring one that is sick or weak back to health, and how to determine the condition of your abdomen.

The first step in keeping yourself healthy is to find a proper balance of diet, exercise, and meditation that is right for you. In addition to this, a regular routine of massaging your abdomen can be very helpful. The simple self-help technique of abdominal massage re-

quires no study, no understanding of medicine or metaphysics, and virtually no time at all to learn or to do. Yet; when done regularly, it is a very effective way to "keep in touch" with your body and improve your health.

Let's look first at the physical structure of the abdomen. The abdominal cavity contains the large intestine, small intestine, liver, gall bladder, stomach, spleen, pancreas, bladder, and sex organs. From the back, the cavity is protected by the spine and pelvis. From the front the internal organs are more exposed and easier to reach. They are protected by a large, three sectioned muscle called the rectus abdominus which extends the length of the cavity. If it is toned yet flexible, this muscle will massage your internal organs when you exercise, laugh, or cry. If the muscle is loose, it will not provide adequate support to the internal organs. If it is too tight, it will pull the rib cage down and



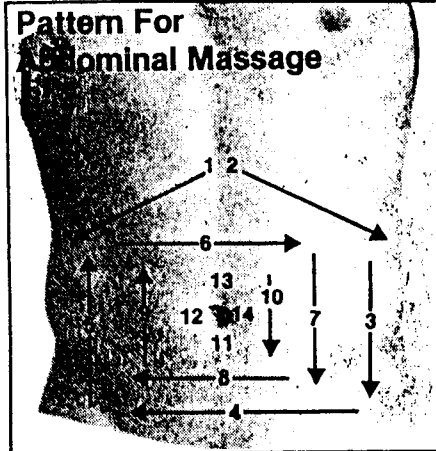
the spine forward. This squeezes the internal organs and does not allow them room to expand and contract healthfully, and limits their functioning. Frequently this results in fat accumulation around the exterior of the organs because their ability to cleanse themselves is impaired.

From a purely muscular point of view, massaging your abdominal muscles the way you would any other voluntary muscle of the body will keep your hara healthy and you looking good from the inside out. It's great to have toned, well-developed abdominal muscles, but it's also important to understand the difference between toned and firm, and the difference between well-developed and over-developed. A hard, tight, rock-like abdomen is not a healthy abdomen. In many cases it is the athletic ideal but it is not desirable for most people. The over-developed rock-like abdomen is developed by football players, boxers, and others as a protective device to cushion the internal organs against punches, kicks, and field tackles, but how often do *you* get tackled? To get an idea of a toned yet flexible abdomen, I suggest you look at competitive swimmers, divers, and gymnasts. You can also see toned, well-developed (not over-developed) abdominals in good figure skaters. The muscles are firm, flexible, and smooth. They do not bulge, they do not look packed in, and they do not limit the range of movement in the spine, shoulders, or rib cage.

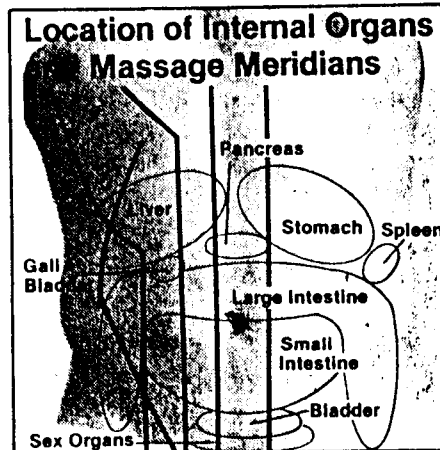
Now let's look a little below the surface. When you massage your belly, you massage your muscles. But there are two sides to every muscle. One side, the outside, you massage. The other side in turn massages the internal organs. This keeps the internal organs flexible and their energy clear and full.

In Oriental medicine, practitioners of acupuncture and massage recognize the physical structures of the abdominal muscles and organs, but they also go a step further into the unseen. In their system, each organ is created by energy. The energy that creates a specific organ courses through the arms, legs, torso or head. The pathway it travels on is called a meridian. When the energy materializes, it does so in the form of the organ itself. For example, "liver energy" enters the body though the back, flows through the meridians of the legs, and

ends up concentrating itself in the right rib cage in the form of the organ, the liver. The excess energy from this process then exits through the front of the body. According to the Oriental view, the organ is the final, most concentrated



form of that particular energy in the body. Functionally, it is the organ's job to store and keep generating this energy in the body. When you massage a limb, you're massaging a secondary location of energy. When you massage the abdomen, where the organs reside, you massage the source of the regenerative energy in the body. To massage the abdomen means then, that you are massaging the entire body. And how lucky that is for us because it means that no matter where or how badly you hurt, you can usually help yourself by massaging your abdomen.



One person who is having excellent results using abdominal massage as a form of treatment is Naoichi Kuzome, a therapist in Kotohira, Japan. Kuzome, now in his mid-eighties, was schooled in traditional medicine. He learned points, meridians, theories of



body development, classification of "disharmonies," and treatment principles. Once he started to practice, however, he quickly abandoned the use of theories and began massaging only the abdomens of the people who came to him for treatment. Now, almost sixty years later, he is still concentrating on the abdomen.

When someone comes to him for knee pain, Kuzome massages the knee for no more than ten minutes then devotes the remaining forty minutes of the treatment to treating the abdomen—the true source of the knee pain. Kuzome also realizes the mind/body connection in an illness. After he has treated a patient once, he gives over the responsibility of the healing to the patient. He teaches the patient how and where to massage his or her own abdomen so that between appointments the patient works on his or her own condition at home, without drugs, clinics, or Kuzome. The major portion of the healing is done by the patient. When patients return for treatment, Kuzome checks their condition, sees where changes have taken place, then recommends new areas of the abdomen to massage. The tools of his trade are his hands and a red marker to mark on the abdomen the areas to be worked.

Kuzome feels that the most important thing is to treat what you feel, and to keep an even, toned abdomen. When he first touches someone, the things he feels for are areas of tension, lumps, heat, flaccidity, pain that is local, and pain that radiates to other parts of the body such as the limbs, head, or back. Then he merely treats what is there. Have a pain, treat a pain. Have a lump, treat a lump. As long as you have a belly and hands you're on your way to health.

The other remarkable thing about this form of massage is that it is preventive—in the most basic sense of the word. Conditions that are not yet evident in a person as illness will not reach the point of becoming an illness if the abdomen is massaged daily for even ten minutes. Thus, abdominal massage is a curing massage but its power is much more subtle for it helps to prevent illness and to develop vitality to its optimal level. Kuzome is helping to cure major illnesses such as breast cancer or heart conditions with this type of massage, but it is equally as effective in developing a healthy person's intellectual and emotional potential as well. When you change the abdomen, you change the

thought patterns of your mind as well—usually for the better.

Try this massage for a week or more. You will notice yourself remembering things you haven't remembered in years. You will find yourself with thoughts and feelings you've never before had. The abdomen, or hara, is the door to yourself. As such, you need to treat yourself with care as you begin this journey. I would suggest you keep a journal of your changes as you begin massaging yourself and make monthly diagrams to chart your progress. You'll be amazed at how your abdomen changes from month to month. You'll see these changes transmit to all levels of your life—physical, social, emotional, psychological.

How do you begin? Because you are massaging your belly, so close to your internal organs, your own intuition is the best guide. You will feel immediately where to press, how hard or soft to press, and what changes are happening when. It's very difficult to make a mistake, but if you're wary begin conservatively—your belly will lead you on. Here are some simple guidelines to get you started.

Begin by lying flat on your back with your legs extended. This stretches and opens the abdomen. Place the four fingers of both hands back to back in a sandwich position. Keep your hands in this position throughout. Press at the top center of the abdomen where your rib cage comes together below your breastbone (sternum). Press along and just below the right rib cage, then press along and just below the left rib cage. Always press only on an exhalation, when you inhale, release your pressure. Go down along the right rib cage, then down along the left rib cage several times before you move to the next step. This helps to relax the muscles and clear the energy from the top part of your body. If you neglect this important step, you are apt to experience some unpleasant sensations such as headaches, nausea, or a bad temper.

Step two begins at the bottom left rib cage. Press in the same way you did under the ribs. Move your fingers down toward the left hip bone and press, then move your fingers to just inside the hip bone and press. Next, move your fingers to halfway between the left hip bone and pubic bone. Press. Now to just above

the pubic bone and press. Notice we are going down the left side of the body. We will be crossing the bottom, going up on the right and across on the top, following the direction of digestion. This pattern makes the massage more relaxing. After massaging above the pubic bone, move to the area halfway between the pubic bone and right hip bone and press. Then move to the inside of the hip bone and press. Next move to above the right hip bone, press, to the base of the right rib cage, and then to the base of the left rib cage. Your rhythm should be: breathe in, press, exhale as you press, release, relax. Repeat this sequence as you move your hands from one area to the next.

Each time you complete one revolution around your belly, begin again with a smaller circle inside the first that you did. You are creating concentric circles around your abdomen and the final revolution will be four presses one at each of the four corners of your navel. You may have noticed a number of different types of areas in your belly. It's not all the same. Maybe you found pain or tenderness, maybe heat, maybe a weakness. Chart what you found and date it. Periodically, as necessary, choose one area that you would like to work on and concentrate on that area for a few days or until you notice a change.

In a month, look at your diagram, feel around your abdomen in concentric circles and make another picture. Are they the same? Chances are they're different. And so, you are your own doctor. That's all you need to know about massage to help heal yourself and others. Any other theories are simply enhancement of this simple principle—that the hara, or abdomen is the source of vitality.

The point of teaching this approach to massage and self-care is not to devalue other methods or viewpoints—it is to demystify them. There is mystery and wonder in everything having to do with the body, mind, and spirit and how they interrelate. Frequently however, this mystery is removed from the grasp of the many and placed in the hands of the few. When it comes to self-healing, this need not be the case. Simple abdominal massage will tune you in to the condition of your body and will help you change it for the better. You will be free to choose those things which nurture and keep you healthy. This is simply a form which helps you know yourself from your own source. □