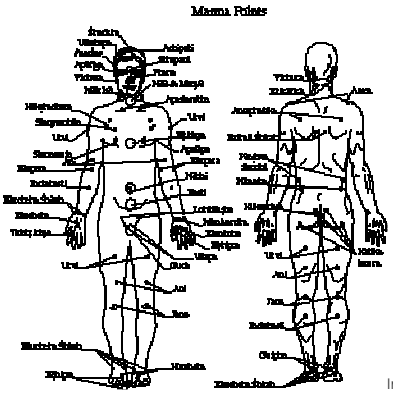

In the ongoing evolution of massage techniques, sometimes it pays to stop peering into the future and, instead, unearth hidden treasures from the past. Marma-point massage, stemming from Ayurveda, the ancient healing system of India, is just such a gem.

Although marma-point massage has been utilized for thousands of years, it's just recently been introduced to the Western world. Now, spas worldwide are offering marma-point massage. With training, this therapy can be added to a spa's menu, or offered as a spa-type therapy by a massage therapist in private practice.
Where consciousness meets matter
The guiding principal of Ayurveda is disease prevention by harmonizing the body's rhythm with nature. One way to create this balance and align the body's healing energies is through marma-point massage. "Marma-point therapy is a mind/body/spirit massage," It goes way beyond the physical to penetrate the body on a deeper level. It's on that level that true healing takes place."Marma is a Sanskrit word meaning hidden, or secret. By definition, a marma point is a juncture on the body where two or more types of tissue meet, such as muscles, veins, ligaments, bones or joints. Yet marma points are much more than a casual connection of tissue and fluids; they are intersections of the vital life force and prana, or breath."The marma points are where consciousness (Prana) meets matter; where deep silence resides in the body." In Ayurveda, marma points are thought to house the three pillars of life, otherwise known as the dosha. According to Ayurvedic philosophy, dosha make up a person's constitution. The trinity includes vata (air), pitta (fire) and kapha (earth). Everyone is born in a state of balance, or prakriti. During the aging process, factors such as anxiety, lacklustre diet, or poor sleep habits cause disharmony among the dosha. Over the years, doshic imbalances begin to block the movement of free-flowing energy in the body. Eventually, the stagnation opens the door to physical and mental discomfort and disease. Enter marma massage. The idea behind massaging the marma points is to cleanse blocked energy, also called chi, by either arousing or calming the dosha. Like a television with three channels, each marma point has three receptors that align with the three dosha. During a marma-point massage, the points are stroked in a deliberate sequence using specific essential oils. "Strictly speaking it's not a massage as defined by hands kneading tissue, "Marma massage is more like a very light stimulation of points on the body." In all, 107 marma points cover the human body. They range in size from one to six inches in diameter. The points were mapped out in detail centuries ago in the Sushruta Samhita, a classic Ayurvedic text.

Marma points correspond to the seven chakras

Major Marma points correspond to the seven chakras, or energy centres of the body, while minor points radiate out along the torso and limbs. The points cover both the front and back body, including 22 on the lower extremities, 22 on the arms, 12 on the chest and stomach, 14 on the back, and 37 on the head and neck. (The mind is considered the 108th marma.) Each has its own Sanskrit name given by Sushruta, one of the founding fathers of Ayurvedic medicine. Marma points are located and measured by the finger widths, called anguli. Unlike the tiny, pin-pricked-sized points in comparable therapies, like acupuncture, marma points are relatively large and easy to find. Many historians believe that other point therapies, including acupuncture, acupressure and reflexology, grew out of the science of marma. The key difference is that most other point practices work through the body's network of energetic currents, or meridians. Marma points, on the other hand, bridge the gap between the physical and energetic bodies by carrying energetic information between the mind and the body's organs and tissues. "A marma point is the junction between physiology and consciousness," They are vital points on the body where vata, pitta, and kapha are present in their subtlest forms." Battle tested

Marma-point massage dates back to southern India circa 1500 BC. Masters of kalari, an ancient martial art, first discovered the power of marma points. In battle, kalari fighters targeted an opponent's marma points as a way to inflict pain and injury. According to kalari lore, people have 12 marma points that, when hit with a knockout blow, can cause instant death. These areas were so important that soldiers even used armour to protect their horses' marma points while riding into battle. Along with their ability to kill, however, comes an ability to heal. Wounded kalari fighters were nursed back to health with marma therapy. Practitioners used marma-point massage to stimulate healing in areas that corresponded to the soldier's injuries. If a warrior suffered a blow to the small intestines, for example, the marma point on the back of the calf, which corresponds directly with the upper intestine, would be massaged to trigger a healing flow of energy to the injury. Eventually, Ayurvedic physicians around India learned of the technique's powers and brought kalari masters into hospitals to teach the art. Soon, marma-point training became mandatory for surgeons, who would take great pains to work around specific points lest they risk a patient's life. Today marma-point massage is still a respected component of Ayurvedic healing Training.
There are no official educational standards for those seeking to call themselves marma-point massage therapists. Some practitioners complete hundreds of hours of apprenticeship alongside Ayurvedic masters, while others glean the basics from weekend workshops. Whichever the case, mastering marma massage isn't something that happens overnight. "[It] isn't something you can learn in a weekend workshop."Marma [points] aren't something to play around with. It is advised to attend an in-depth training session offered by one of the nation's Ayurvedic schools. Among the first things to learn are the locations and qualities of the basic marma points. While the thought of memorizing the position and width of 107 points may be daunting, one can easily start by learning the names and qualities of the most apparent ones. Many marma points are naturally sensitive areas that most massage therapists are familiar with, such as the temples, the base of the skull, and the backs of the knees. Eventually, you can expand your knowledge to include a wider breadth of points. Also important is the ability to discern what imbalances may be present in a client's dosha. This can be as simple as having the client complete a questionnaire on diet, ailments and behaviour patterns, or as complex as teaming up with an Ayurvedic physician who can provide a full doshic evaluation. Typically, this evaluation includes an in-depth questionnaire, examination of the tongue, eyes and nails, and taking wrist-pulse measurements. (In Ayurveda there are multiple pulses measured in the wrist.) The final preparatory step is to choose one or more essential oils that either complement the client's dosha or brings her back into balance. For example, a marma-point massage therapist may use oil that is high in pitta energy, such as sunflower oil, for a client whose pitta dosha is low. "Knowledge of essential oils is helpful, "You need to know the differences between oils that are stimulating versus those that are relaxing. Your body instinctively loves the smell of what heals you, so you don't want to use oil that aggravates the dosha."

A subtle technique when it comes to massaging the marma points, the subtlety of the technique cannot be overstated. Using one or more fingers (depending on the size of the point), the massage therapist starts with a light touch, becoming increasingly firm over the course of one to three minutes per point. Working only as deep as the client feels comfortable; the therapist's motions can be either direct or circular. Clockwise movements stimulate and energize a marma point, while counter clockwise motions break up blocked energy held within a point. "One can feel each point releasing; the flow of energy in my body was very dynamic, not subtle at all." With marma massage, something happens that makes me more in tune with my own energy, like a built-in reminder of how to relax. It gives a long-lasting sense of calm." Although some massage therapists may weave marma-point stimulation into other techniques, purists will argue that it is best done on its own. A typical marma-point massage session lasts between 60 to 90 minutes, during which the therapist either covers all 107 points briefly or concentrates her attention on a handful of key points. The difference lies in the expertise of the practitioner and the needs of the client. Either way, the experience can be deeply relaxing and rejuvenating. "Marma massage had a tremendous effect on the energy moving inside body; it is like a winding down the root, to stillness. Going deeper into the experience that ever went with deep-tissue massage or acupuncture, and the feeling lasted for days." "Its popularity will grow as more and more people look beyond Western medicine for ways of healing," she says. "Besides, when I teach my student's marma massage, they fall in love with it."