

Professional BEAUTY

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AND TERRIFIC**
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*the heart and
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cheer**
*the colours of
celebration!*



ZEN AND THE ART OF skin maintenance

Dr Adam Sheridan, MBBS, FACD, FACMS, FAAFPS, dives into Japanese Zen culture, a school of Buddhism imbued with Taoism, that prioritises intuition and daily 'zazen' – meditation to achieve insight into the true nature of existence over ritual practices and the rote learning of scripture.



THE GOAL OF meditation is to achieve deep insight into our best nature and to manifest this through personal expression in daily life.

Inherent in the Zen mindset, or at least my naïve experience of this, is a sense of calm focus, balance and interconnectedness. Clarity, amidst the buffeting pressures of daily life. This encourages us to make good choices to guide the daily actions which define us, spiritually and physically.

This approach is ideally suited to the practice of medicine, most particularly dermatology. Mere knowledge of what is good for us is not sufficient; we must enact this knowledge through repeated daily practice, for the benefit of ourselves and others.

It is good to emerge from winter into the warm embrace and possibilities of spring and summer. It is also the perfect time to 'zoom out' and regard the bigger picture. Is your life balanced and connected? Is there a smooth flow between what you hope to achieve and what you are actively doing for your health? At the risk of getting too fluffy, are your mind and body in concert?

In assessing this myself, I am often struck that at times of busyness and stress, the bathroom cabinet is just as cluttered and chaotic as my to-do list. Yet, on holiday and at peace with the world, everything feels simple, and all that is required are a gentle cleanser, moisturiser, sunscreen... oh and that passport and wallet!

So, enough of the sentiment; how does this relate to practical skin care?

When connected and calm, the entire body works in unison. The natural order of things is restored and simple facilitation is all that is required. Redundant are the latest fads and heroic measures. You easily sense what is right for your body and, like a spring flower; all you need do is water and feed it.

So, how to rebalance when not idling in a Zen garden (the Ryoanji is not to be missed) in Kyoto?

At our practice we believe the mind-bowel-skin axis is central to health. The brain and bowel are amongst the first systems to develop

in the nascent foetus, and they remain strongly connected throughout life, exerting profound influences upon each other. Not for nothing do we refer to an intuitive insight as a 'feeling in my gut'; and many of us are familiar with the addled brain and clouded thought processes that may follow poor choices in diet and nutrition.

The skin in turn comprises the largest organ in the body, and is continuous with the beginning and end of the gastrointestinal system. The skin and bowel are inextricably conjoined; an inflamed bowel will often reflect in similarly inflamed skin and vice versa. We now understand that this relates to the shared immune functions of the skin and bowel as 'first responders' and points of defence against external threats.

To realign one's body and improve general health, we suggest assessing and enacting simple steps to re-balance each component of the mind-bowel-skin axis.

1. Mind

We think therefore we are. We need to think of an action before doing it. Our actions subsequently define who we are. So, try to think about what is truly important. Prioritise your health, family and friendships. Revel in the knowledge that you can decide to make your life and health better, if you are strategic and stick at it. Don't be overwhelmed by the challenge. Instead, take small steps every day. As my grandmother used to warn me when I was little... 'Watch out, that cookie is bigger than your head... take small bites and don't forget to chew!'. Wise lady.

It is helpful to write a list of three positive daily actions to kick things off. Mine are remember to drink more water and less coffee and wine; sleep early; and enjoy a genuine conversation with a loved one every day.

Stress drives hormone spikes which contribute to acne breakouts and aggravate conditions including dermatitis and psoriasis. A calm mind equals calm skin. Simple measures such as regular exercise, reading, meditation, and free time spent 'off the grid' away from your devices all help reduce base stress levels.

2. Bowel

Much has been written on the topic of bowel health, diet and mood. This is very important as a positive and clear frame of mind encourages good health choices and drives follow-up action.

At a more basic level, bowel irritants write their effects large upon the skin. An example we see daily at our clinic is facial inflammation and acne relating to inflammatory bowel conditions. Skin treatments help, but the most dramatic improvements follow calming therapies directed at the source of inflammation within the bowel.

For those without a specific bowel complaint, more general principles apply. Avoid irritants such as acidic and processed foods, alcohol and excessive amounts of sugar. It is also important to respect the normal bowel flora and to avoid an imbalance through unnecessary antibiotics. An example is where antibiotics are prescribed for acne for long periods. An unfortunate situation can arise whereby the antibiotics actually go on to prolong and exacerbate the condition they were prescribed to eradicate. It should also be noted that bowel flora contribute to vitamin pathways; another reason to respect nature's inherent balance.

Probiotics can be helpful when long-term antibiotics are unavoidable. Consult your doctor for specific advice.

Choose fibre, protein, complex carbohydrates, natural foods, grains, nuts, berries and water to further nurture your bowel.

We also encourage a 'skin support breakfast' at times of anticipated exposure to harsh environmental impacts, such as increased sunshine and allergic pollens over spring. Almonds, berries, zinc and antioxidants arm your skin with the tools to bounce back from these insults.

3. Skin

Now that your mind and bowel are balanced, it's time to get specific at the cellular skin level.

Perhaps the most important factor in maintaining the health and appearance of your skin is the prevailing pH (potential of hydrogen). This indicates whether the surface barrier of your skin is acidic, basic or alkaline. The ideal skin pH is approximately 5.5, which is slightly acidic. This acid mantle is essential to maintaining a moisturised skin barrier, effective in preventing infection and minimising inflammation.

Alkaline skin on the other hand tends to appear dry, lined and aged. Acidic skin tends to be inflamed and acne prone. Should your skin present with such features suggesting imbalance, some simple steps are to be encouraged.

Avoid harsh cleansers and soaps which are alkaline. Avoid toners, or choose an organic vinegar-based product if you are an incurable devotee. Avoid applying bar soaps to your face, and minimise exposure to extremes of water temperature during bathing. Nourish the skin and support natural renewal through a pH-balanced, non-fragranced cleanser and effective moisturiser. Should problems persist despite a simple supportive approach for greater than six weeks, consider active repair through the addition of an active antioxidant and retinoid containing products.

A handy hint over spring is to gently cleanse and rinse your entire body and face each night and then moisturise before bed. This removes potential allergens such as pollens and environmental pollutants, rather than allowing them to go undisturbed for six to eight hours during sleep. This is especially important if you suffer hay fever, and will go a long way to reducing the dark circles under the eyes which may result from this in darker skin types.

A balanced daily routine comprising adequate sleep, exercise and a healthy diet is the foundation of good skin and general health.

Spring is a time that naturally lends itself to thoughts of renewal. Your skin turns over every month. It is inspiring to realise that you are therefore only 28 days away from improved skin. Start now such that your skin matches the glory of the coming summer sunshine.

Finally, reach out to those around you and encourage improvement in others, as they will you. This will be your spiritual reward! ■



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