



A Body, Mind & Spirit Publication

*This is a nonprofit publication*

# Odyssey

*"The Journey of Self-Discovery and Spiritual Enlightenment"*

Number 128

December 2011 — January 2012



***"Faith is the strength by which a shattered world  
shall emerge into the light."***

**HELEN KELLER**

# Reflexology - Its History & Purpose

By Rory Foster



Reflexology is a holistic healing practice that has been proven effective in addressing many health problems. Its science is based on the principle that there are reflex areas in the feet and hands that correspond to all the glands, organs, and systems of the body. By applying a compression technique using the thumb and fingers on these reflexes, the reflexologist stimulates nerves that connect to a corresponding body part. This improves blood circulation, opens congested and blocked nerve pathways, and brings the body into homeostasis (balance). One of the greatest benefits is its effectiveness in reducing tension and stress—the principal cause of most illness.

Though we don't know for sure where it was first developed and introduced, reflexology as a pressure therapy has been used by various cultures throughout history. Many believe that it originated in China 5,000 years ago and has a historical link with acupuncture and *shiatsu*. Others believe that it originated in ancient Babylonian and Egyptian periods. The oldest proof of reflexology we have was discovered in Egypt. It is a pictograph dated around 2330 B.C. found in the tomb of the Egyptian physician, Ankmahor, at Saqqara. It depicts two men working on the feet and hands of two other men.



Research also shows that reflex therapy or practices similar to it existed in Russia, India, Japan, and in ancient Greece until 200 A.D. In the Western Hemisphere we find evidence of the practice in the Inca and Mayan civilizations. It is thought that they passed this knowledge to the Native North Americans who for centuries have applied reflex pressure to the feet as a healing modality. The Bear Clan of the Cherokee Nation in North Carolina have long acknowledged its importance in maintaining physical, mental, and spiritual balance and they continue to practice it today.

**Zone Therapy:** Reflex therapy in some form had also been practiced in Europe since the 14<sup>th</sup> century. In 1898, Sir Henry Head of London discovered after years of neurological study that certain zones on the skin became hypersensitive to pressure when a diseased organ was connected through nerves to that skin region. He established what became known as “zones of hyperalgesia.”

Dr. William Fitzgerald advanced the practice of modern reflex therapy based on the principles of Sir Henry's zone theory. Born in Connecticut in 1872, he practiced ear, nose and throat medicine in London, Vienna, Boston and Hartford. Wanting to develop a method of anesthesia for minor surgery, he found that by applying pressure on the fingers would create an analgesic effect on different parts of the body. He could then perform minor surgical procedures using this pressure technique. In Dr. Fitzgerald's book, *Zone Therapy*, he divided the body into ten longitudinal zones—5 zones each for the right and left hemispheres—that run from the top of the head to the tips of the toes and fingers. Each finger and toe falls into one zone. His theory was that parts of the body found within a designated zone is linked with one another by energy flow within that zone. So, by pressing reflexes on the hand in zone 2 for instance will have an effect on all of the body parts within that zone.

Many physicians were skeptical of Fitzgerald's theory and practice of zone therapy. However, one enthusiastically receptive physician was Dr. Joseph Shelby Riley. He was a doctor of chiropractic and naturopathy and he expanded upon

Fitzgerald's theory. He developed the technique of using the thumb and fingers, which differed from Fitzgerald's use of tools; he wrote four books on zone therapy and taught extensively on the subject.

**Reflexology:** Eunice Ingham worked for Dr. Riley in the 1930's as a therapist and devoted herself wholeheartedly to further developing the practice of zone therapy that eventually became a new healing modality that Ingham called “Reflexology.” She is regarded as the “Mother of Modern Reflexology.” As Fitzgerald focused primarily on the hands Ingham concentrated on reflexes in the feet—she discovered that the feet are more sensitive than the hands. Over the years she was able to map out zones on the feet that related to the every organ and gland in the body. In 1938, she published a book compiling and explaining her experiences and theories entitled *Stories the Feet Can Tell* and in 1951, published *Stories the Feet Have Told*.

Eunice Ingham said, “Circulation is life. Stagnation is death.” She found that by applying her “Ingham Compression Method of Reflexology” on reflexes in the feet it improved overall circulation and could normalize blood pressure. Ingham further explained that stagnating toxins and congestion develop in the feet due to sand-like crystals that form on nerve endings. They are deposits of calcium and uric acid and are the culprits for many health problems as they impede normal nerve and blood supply to the parts of the body that correspond to that nerve reflex. Through reflexology these crystals can be broken down and then removed by blood and lymph circulation. Finally, she taught that reflexology can alleviate pain, relieve stress and tension, and brings the body into a state of balance where it has a better opportunity to heal itself.

Since Eunice Ingham's breakthroughs in modern reflexology using zones as its foundation, some reflexologists have come full circle to one of reflexology's origins—China—and they follow the energy channel system of Meridians that is used in acupuncture. Meridian and zone therapy both state that energy channels link the hands and feet to organs and glands in the body. Reflexology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century seems to be embracing the systems of East and West by combining the knowledge of both zone and meridian energy pathways to help heal and balance the body, mind, and spirit.

Rory Foster is an author, educator, Reiki Master, and Reflexologist. He is certified by the International Institute of Reflexology and trained under Dwight Byers, nephew of Eunice Ingham and the world's foremost authority on hand and foot reflexology. Rory is on the adjunct faculty at the University of Louisville and is a professor emeritus at DePaul University in Chicago. He has a Reflexology and Reiki practice in Anchorage/Louisville and can be reached at 502.558.7041 or by email at [Rorydfoster@gmail.com](mailto:Rorydfoster@gmail.com).



## REFLEXOLOGY

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