

RETURN TO VAIDYGRAMA, Ayurveda Healing Village December 2016

It was a thankfully uneventful journey from Delhi where I awoke on Dec. 14, the day long planned for me to arrive at Vaidyagrama for the second time of my life. Touching down at Coimbatore airport just before sunset felt indeed like a type of coming home, though I've only been here once before – last year when I accompanied a small group of patients from the US & Canada for an experimental experience of 'authentic panchakarma'.

For years, I had searched for a suitable place to give westerners confidence in traveling all the way to India, effectiveness of treatments and a learning experience for all levels of commitment to Ayurveda. The investment is perhaps a third that in north America, so the 41-day classical program was out of reach for me and others who wanted/needed a longer rejuvenation program. Here however, it's feasible and moreover compelling, I feel.

Right away on stepping off the aircraft, the air was warm and tropically humid, certainly compared to the cold of Delhi and more so to the cold of Surrey, presently under snow! My taxi driver remembered me and my family details, the doctor was present to greet me at the splendid entrance to the hospital campus and the walk to my same room was like returning to my childhood bedroom. This time though, pink hibiscus flowers were laid out for my welcome – oh, the sweetness!

Last year it was all new to me – how does the shower function? (then I'd learned the water heating system is entirely solar powered here, as a model of green, sustainable development). What are the toileting practices? (last year I learned about the superior sanitation of spray hoses). Do I have the right converter/adaptor? (three different ones and none seemed to work consistently). So many new and wonderful discoveries, and this year I feel more habituated, seasoned even!

India has its own traffic patterns – please don't expect drivers to remain in their lane or to stop at red lights or to go one-way on a one-way street. Just close your eyes and you'll very probably arrive safely, if a little later than hoped. Line-ups are a way of life with such large urban populations. Please don't expect people to respect a queue or to throw their trash into a designated container.

Do however, (except in line-ups) expect respect and honesty from pretty much everyone. Refreshing change from Broadway in Vancouver, where you can be dissed or worse just for walking down the street.

Tomorrow I'm looking forward to seeing the tree I planted last year and its interim growth, meeting my doctor from last year - the amazing Dr. HariKrishnan - and to greet the first two of my group arrivals. The others arrive on Friday and our program begins on Monday. I'm looking forward to seeing the huge botanical garden again – it covers almost the entire campus of 4 1/2 acres, except the buildings and walkways.

From last year, I discovered the importance of allowing time-zone adjustments to unfold on their own schedule. Having been in Delhi for two weeks prior meant I had already adjusted, which took perhaps 5 days or so for bodily routines to adapt. Ayurveda always considers the basic bio-rhythms of sleep, appetite and elimination, whether traveling or at home. These are the cardinal indicators of the balance of Vata (elimination), Pitta (appetite) and Kapha (sleep).

While in Delhi, I had the golden opportunity to meet with the AYUSH ministry officials to make connections between Canada and India with a view to bridge Ayurveda education into B.C. Now we have a clear path to our Ayurveda conference for 2017-18 and opening our college in 2018-19, thanks to the kind receptivity, enthusiasm and support of our officer! Lots of volunteer time will be needed to realize this intention together.

If reading this, you'd like to be a part of creating new pathways in Ayurveda education in Canada, dear reader, please contact me with your skill base and availability, OK?

Thursday, December 15, 2016

Awakening early morning after a fine long sleep following yesterday's wearying day of travel, I found meditation to come easily and naturally in this atmosphere of timelessness. By sunrise, the familiar morning prayers from the temple resounded, echoing such a long history of Tamil Nadu state customs of worship and devotion. South India is known for some of the oldest temples still existing, some dating back over 3,000 years. Amazing.

Today's satsang touched in part on how the ideal sustainable model for living is best in a village population of about 500. Overcrowding of cities and even towns has led to stress, conflict, disease and environmental degradation. Dr. Ramkumar Kutty, one of Vaidyagrama's founders, presented statistics that if each family of 4 has 1/4 acre to live on, there will still be sufficient land on this planet for forests, rivers, lakes, mountains and other natural features. It's a mathematical image, but gives pause for thought, eh? See: www.johnjeavons.info

This day has been a delight of birdsongs, flowers and an atmosphere of Ayurveda living. At home, I'd been increasingly simplifying my life, though from today it's becoming so much simpler yet, and I love it. This evening two of my group arrive from the west. How marvelous to anticipate watching them become introduced to this place of healing, and all that lies in store for them through their personal healing and learning.

Friday is the day for the weekly 'gho puja' or the ceremony for honouring cows, special not only due to the reverence for the integration of all living beings for food and material support for all, but also to acknowledge our human intelligence and capacity to choose sustainable living in harmony together with all living beings, large and small. Each has a God-given life-cycle, unique characteristics and gifts to bring to the whole.

Saturday is now international community night at Vaidyagrama, when people share their talent and culture from all over the world. A violinist has been heard practicing her contribution, evidently an original piece composed to express her love for this place and its transformations.

Last year, our group had created a participatory round to sing together with all the patients, and once I did a duet with a young woman from Quebec – we both felt so comforted to hear French again! Another couple from the England theatre world created a skit spoofing the changes we westerners go through during PK – very funny! It's a special night.

'Tapasya' from Sanskrit means in part, austerity or restraint, to observe inner sacrifice. Panchakarma is already revealing to me how giving up what is not in my long term best spiritual interest can lend positive support to this purification of body, mind and consciousness, and the program has not even officially begun. However, my intention for purification is already presenting ample opportunity for reforming my thinking and habits.

Saturday, December 17, 2016

'My' pretty little tree planted last year has grown three-fold! Such an example of faith, simplicity, being true to oneself, surrender to nature's wisdom and growing upward! Yesterday, we completed three of our five medical intakes and already people feel more seen than ever by a medical practitioner. Now the benchmark has been set in our lives for medical care. Today will be our last two intakes and treatments will begin Sunday.

Tuesday, December 20, 2016

By now, our group is on the third day of treatment – each individualized to the patient. The purpose of the preparatory ('purva') karmas is to begin to open the bodily channels for cleansing in due course. These treatments are meant to gently open the psycho-biological channels in preparation for cleansing procedures later on. As each person finds her own routine, she is asked to keep a daily record of her food, water, sleep, appetite, eliminations and emotional observations.

Eliminations can take different forms such as bowel movements, urination, sweat, skin eruptions, swellings, eye secretions, lung secretions, tears, etc. The physicians encourage us to observe our changes with neutrality and compassion, which helps identify associations between these eliminations and our psycho-spiritual process of evolution/self-realization. How is our soul's journey mirrored in our day-to-day physical life? We're invited to consider this adage: 'As above (in our higher consciousness), so below (in the material body)'.

This atmosphere of truly holistic healing is expressed at Vaidyagrama through various non-treatment options such as sunrise and sunset Sanskrit prayers at the temple, daily afternoon satsangs with the various Ayurveda physicians where all enquiries about this experience of ancient-style purification (and indeed life itself) are welcome, cooking classes, herb walks, library visits, various pujas (ancient devotional practices), yoga nidra (rest and self-introversion practice) and perhaps most especially, the botanical garden that occupies almost the entire 4.5 acres of this campus, providing medicines, vital air and exquisite colorful beauty.

The endless food discussion is addressed by the simple, wholesome, local, nourishing, digestible and yummy meals. Red rice, dahl, fresh local vegetables, coconut, buttermilk, etc. support the digestion to in turn support gentle, scientific elimination of toxins. As the body purifies, the mind also concurrently purifies and spontaneous realization and meditation arise by themselves. In these gentle holistic ways of authentic Ayurveda cleansing and rejuvenation, we reform ourselves painlessly, blamelessly and surely. 'Satva (true clarity) removes the pain of suffering', said Dr. Ramkumar recently.

Naturally, time is an equalizing factor in this self-healing journey, as each one has the same 24 hrs in each day and all have a limited life-span. We all are allocated time to choose to develop forbearance, acuity of self-observation, satvic choices and selfless service. Time is becoming my ally now at 69, and this process of Ayurveda cleansing and rejuvenation teaches me how to take time, how to make good use of time and how to see time as my servant, not my master.

Wednesday, December 21, 2016

Today is the exact solstice, bringing the last minutes of the waning sun of 2016 to the northern hemisphere. Oh, the longing for the sun's properties of warmth and growth (e.g.) photosynthesis, to return and fulfill his promise of increase and benevolence. The quiet stillness is so restorative, and invites me within.

Yes, emotions can surface in this cleansing process, bringing them to the lens of Satva (true clarity), Rajas (agitation) and Tamas (avoidance of responsibility). Indeed, this is the time to expect to resolve long-standing patterns of self-understanding, leading to strengthening of the mind's capacity for rising above suffering back to its natural state of peace.

Vaidyagrama's particular allure I feel, along with its medical excellence, is its bio-dynamic philosophy of sustainable living in harmony with Nature. Nature possesses all qualities, ones which we begin to prefer and others we tend to eschew or even come to disdain. Mosquitoes, cockroaches, bats, centipedes, no-see-ems, rats, micro-organisms, fleas, ants and heat all may create aversion in our western mind of sanitation and air-conditioning, though returning to holistic living means finding ways of harmonious co-existence with all pre-existing natural phenomenon, teaching tolerance, acceptance and appreciation of Nature's capacity for balance, including our human natures.

My group has remarked more than once on the cleanliness of the rooms and spaces here, using cleaning methods based in 'ahimsa' or non-violence, one of the spiritual pre-requisites conveyed by the ancient sages for achieving balanced, peaceful, purposeful living. A concession is made in this centre for the installation and use of fans, though I've heard the management would like to return to non-interference with air and temperature fluctuations. I'm finding such a beauty behind these commitments, and watch myself adjusting to my best spiritual interest, dropping judgements, habits and conditioned responses.

Thursday, December 22, 2016

A lovely home-made crèche scene has been created by the young men here to show respect for one of the holiest days in Christendom. Straw, wise men effigies, miniature barn animals and star replicas are garlanded with Indian flashing lights, expressing a truly inclusive evocation of the first Noel. Many staff here from the neighbouring state of Kerala are practicing Christians, and have also integrated well with the dominantly Hindu cultural backdrop. Tamil Nadu and Kerala are truly multi-cultural zones.

Today one of our group was overheard answering a new arrival about her experiences here so far. She expressed that she had been to different places in the world for cleansing programs and said, 'Yes, this is the best'. In response to particulars, she told about the superior medical attention from the doctors and that the simple fresh food served was in fact 'enjoyable' to her. She expressed that there are no refrigerators because the food is local and fresh picked and immediately prepared. 'The food is great', she said. She also reported to the newcomer that the facility itself is beautiful. It's constructed in part from bricks sun-dried from the local earth with ancient rammed-earth building methods.

Internet access is discouraged during treatment at Vaidyagrama, but minimally provided in limited exposure at the facility entrance, and one other 'hot spot', so gathering tends to occur in these locations. Some visitors here are not seen at these public places at all, as they maintain complete retreat, rest, silence, introversion and focus their full attention on their recovery/wellness process.

All the ground space at Vaidyagrama is taken up with a vast and beautiful botanical garden, featuring more than 200 local medicinal plants, shrubs and trees. Many of the medicinal preparations used for treatments are freshly harvested and prepared for individualized internal and external medicinal preparations. The rainwater harvesting system here is being implemented presently to help ensure sufficient water, and a grey water system is also in development to collect liquid waste from various sources including treatment rooms and kitchen. It becomes naturally purified in 3 stages. Oh, the prana! Nature is truly a great teacher that helps bring understanding of all virtues.

Many of the native species of trees and plants here are identified by name plates in 4 languages: Latin (botanical name), Sanskrit, Malayalam and Tamil. Each weather-proof sign invites a personal relationship between the plant and observer, to see, touch, feel and smell the living soul that is our original, God-given medicine. In Ayurveda, it is permissible to harvest a plant when it appears in abundance and in season. Common sense, you say? A medicine was described in the Ayurveda medical scriptures as 'that which removes the disease while causing no harm', meaning no side-effects.

Friday, December 23, 2016

Each day begins with a call to prayer at the central temple, built according to principles of ancient Vaastu, the classical science of architecture. The traditional chants' resonance spreads throughout the vicinity, with the intention of uplifting and blessing all living beings, near and far. Ayurveda brings a subtle awareness of vibration, and the constant opportunity to choose 'satva guna' or the quality of everlasting truth while transiting this creation. The temple is built for creating an ascending awareness, with its tiered, pyramidal roofs.

Breakfast today is a lovely, light kitchari served with an amazing coconut chutney – perhaps more soup than paste, and oh, so satisfying! Portions served are so hearty, though I could only consume half before my appetite became satisfied. Food is varied each day and provides for ever-changing menus. Other breakfast offerings may be dahl, green beans, rice porridge, idli (fermented rice patties), dosa (fermented pancakes) or soft cooked red rice. Broth served about 11am can be rice kanji, dahl soup, vegetable broth or other. Lunch is the main meal, served generally about noon.

Today also is the day a group of local elder women dedicated to preservation and dissemination of their ancient south Indian spiritual heritage have arrived to recite and sing together the 'Srimad Narayaniyam' in their familiar group of mostly senior members.

I've heard it was composed by 16th century poet and Sanskrit grammarian, Sri Narayan Battathiri in the Guruvayur temple as he was undergoing a period of severe suffering. Upon completing the composition, it is said he was cured. This prayer recital is to bring healing for those who suffer pain. This all-day (9am-4pm with lunch break) singing, followed by puja (blessing ceremony) for inducing healing.

For more information about this amazing story, please read this link:

<http://www.narayaneeyam-firststep.org/introduction.html>

Saturday, December 24, 2016

Arising with a feeling of elation this morning of Christmas Eve day, perhaps associating a childhood anticipation and perhaps feeling the progressive benefits of this healing program in my body and consciousness, I somehow feel very hopeful, creative and clearly guided. Ayurveda is good for humanity, indeed is in its best interest to revive, regardless of how lost she became to most of the world. I feel so grateful to experience the benefits of a life dedicated to her divine wisdom.

Changes in each of our group member's individualized healing programs are unfolding. Internal oleation with pure or medicated local ghee, or basti (enema) therapy, or pinda sweda (herbalized bundles tied, infused and applied with a type of pounding motion), or other suitable therapy may be chosen by the doctors, now that the 'opening of the channel systems' phase is well underway.

Saturday night is international community night here at Vaidyagrama and all guests are invited to get together to meet others and share a community meal, lovingly served by the staff, beautifully dressed for the occasion. Entertainment is generated from within the patient ranks, so tonight was the Christmas Carol Eve, with great participation from various countries. One young woman, a violin virtuoso, led the carol singing superbly! We even heard harmonies in the group, bringing a fine feeling of unity.

But say good night and sleep we must! May all experience a truly happy Christmas Day tomorrow. May the 'Prince of Peace' be remembered as the global citizen reformer that He was, bringing the path of love to all of his generation and so much beyond.

Sunday, December 25, 2016

And so begins the final week of 2016, a perfect time for shedding old, untenable patterns of living, leaving them in the dead past. Oh, how wonderful to be spared the malls, the haste, the 'should haves' and 'could haves' and especially the sugar! How fine to have a feeling of increased time and space for meditation, contemplation, introspection and renewal.

Our group is expressing almost daily how glad they are to have made the decision to come here at this time for treatment. Now they're reaping the benefits of their faith in this experience of travel all the way to India for individualized healing according to ancient Ayurveda. Soon, inner 'walls' may arise to be witnessed.

This evening's puja was led by dear Rose Baudin, a wonderful American teacher now living near Byron Bay in Australia. She's an amazing pujari and created a most serene and sincere environment for blessing all beings, great and small, healing of self and others, removal of all obstacles to spiritual progress and generating/receiving blessings of the divine feminine. It was a very powerful experience at the temple hall this evening, with deep healing experiences on this important day, remembering the universal Prince of Peace.

Monday, December 26, 2016

At this point, our group is only about ¼ way through our cleansing program. Here at Vaidyagrama, we are asked to keep a careful daily log of our body/mind process, in order to become acutely aware of our bio-rhythms, taking us deeper into a subtler and subtler understanding our unique mind-body relationship. It's an exercise that may be useful for everyone experiencing undue symptoms, to try to simplify solutions for balanced living and self-healing. All healing lies within.

Tuesday, December 27, 2016

Today is the 49th birthday of my firstborn, my son Brice, bringing back the wondrous feeling of a holding a newborn – my very own newborn. Such an incredible responsibility, somehow bringing with it, the empowerment to meet that awesome responsibility! How could I know that my later life would bring Ayurveda to me? Brice was a teenager and Celia, born 5 ½ yrs. later, a pre-teen when I began my study of Ayurveda, and their support of me to follow my heart proved to be the grace, means and permission to dedicate to Ayurveda science. I do hope Ayurveda is benefitting each of them, as it is me.

India awakens early – it's partly a matter of national pride, to work hard and make the nation prosperous and successful again. Also, there's a widespread awareness of the early morning hours being more 'satvic' and therefore to be dedicated to prayers, chanting, 'puja' and singing praises, according to one's personal style and preference, as so many religious practices co-exist happily here and have done for many centuries. Many consider the day to be suitably begun only with these communions of the individual with the divine.

Vaidyagrama also awakens early, especially for the morning 'kashayam' or freshly made, individualized herbal decoction preparations to be distributed to each patient according the physician's instructions. The therapists who prepare them are up earlier yet. Then comes the bell to call the sincere ones to the 'BrahmaKalam' or temple, as the ancient chants begin to resound throughout the complex. Kashayams are taken about 6am and 6pm, or about sunrise and sunset, at this inland location and latitude of tropical savannah.

Saturday, December 31, 2016

Yesterday was the weekly 'Gho Puja' to honour the cows. Several cows are now flourishing here and one particular mother is chosen these days to be decorated, garlanded, petted and fed by the community members, to help bring a renewed realization of the interconnectedness of life. Mother, now expecting again, and her almost yearling calf were brought into the temple for all to appreciate, as representatives of the special role cows play in daily life. These particular cows have a large area in which to roam, and are fondly named and cared for by experienced cowherds.

Factory cows in the west come to mind, though these animals are often hidden from public view. Then we can't witness their misery and inevitable destiny. In India, the belief is widely held that milk products from factory sources do not qualify as food at all, as the cows' freedom of choice are affected by their feed quality, range quality, lack of natural sunlight and diurnal cycles, which became so profit-driven. Milk drawn that morning from a free-range cow, is considered fresh; all other milk is considered 'stale' and must be used only if boiled and cultured, if at all. Milk in cartons or worse, plastic, is considered toxic, as it 'clogs' the bodily channels instead of nourishing them.

Clogging of channels is causative to disease according to Ayurveda. The natural, free flow of life force leads to healthy cellular function, tissue function and channel system function. Stagnation causes dis-ease, while panchakarma is for restoring the free flow of prana, the intelligence of nature's expression of joy, to manifest throughout the channels of body, mind and consciousness, bringing clarity, efficiency and subtlety. Health is defined in part as being 'seated in the Self', and brings a natural nobility, humility and righteousness to the individual.

This last day of the year carries on like all other days at Vaidyagrama, with individualized patient care adjusted to one's personal health evolution. However, this evening we'll have our optional

community gathering to meet, greet and share our culture with others, celebrating and noting this final day of 2016.

"I'm ecstatic!", expressed one of our group spontaneously this morning, with big eyes and smile, regarding the state of her rejuvenating tongue, which had shown signs of deep-seated Vata disturbance on arrival. Her treatment program is bringing remarkable improvements in digestion, assimilation and elimination, the basis for tissue and organ health according to Ayurveda. She can see dramatic changes in her own psycho-biology as well as in our other group members.

Tomorrow is a day of 'puja' or ritual to celebrate the coming New Year, emanating peace to all residents of this planet and indeed all planes of existence. Our group plans a celebratory luncheon together for New Year's Day, supporting us to know one another better and strengthen the natural support systems arising from our shared experiences of undergoing this profound and intimate cleansing and rejuvenation experience together, so far from 'home'.