

Holistic HeartSpeak: A Mother & Daughter's Journey Inward

by Alexia Paul

at

first glance, Kalari Kovilakom lacks the typical hallmarks of a hospital. It's serene, not spotless; it's steeped in tradition rather than technology. Yet, despite its spa-like atmosphere, those who go there seek much more than a vacation. Located in the verdant tropics of Kerala, a region in southern India, this 200-year-old Vengunad palace is suffused with ritual, discipline and a fierce devotion to the practice of Ayurveda. "Ayur" (life) and "veda" (knowledge) are Sanskrit words that, together, describe an ancient holistic healing practice of herbal, dietary and lifestyle practices. At its core are the natural world and a rejection of the chemicals on which modern Western medicine has become so dependent.

And while "holistic" is a wellness catchall these days, Ayurveda originated some 3,000 years ago and may just be the definitive therapy to integrate mind, body and soul. In 2016, Martha Wiedemann and her daughter, Rebecca, were seeking a retreat where they could experience Panchakarma—an intense, 21-day Ayurveda-based purification process that removes bodily toxins that can cause disease. Martha's parents, who are Indian, were long committed to Ayurvedic principles, so she was raised with an awareness of the practice. Rebecca was curious about the practice due to some minor digestive issues and a desire to clear out any impurities that had built up in her system. For Martha,

associate director and wellness advisor at Badrutts Palace, a luxury hotel in the Swiss Alps, the experience was meant to be purely professional research. There are more than 2,000 Ayurvedic hospitals in India, and they chose Kalari Kovilakom due to its results-oriented reputation as well as its commitment to organic medicine and cuisine. At first, "I was actually embarrassed to go," says Rebecca, "because I thought, 'I'm going to be the youngest person and the healthiest person there.'"

Kalari Kovilakom is nestled against the Western Ghats, a misty range of mountains in the remote Palakkad district. After the long journey from Switzerland, all Martha wanted was a shower. But a small cut on her ankle that had been a mere annoyance before she'd left home had bloomed into a painful infection in her leg. When Dr. Manoj Namboodiri requested their initial



Kalari Kovilakom, a 200-year-old palace once a part of the old Vengunad Kingdom, now features 18 modern suites and 12 treatment rooms. The wellness resort is the last surviving aspect of the old Vengunad Kingdom, and its grounds and architecture are said to complement the healing process. Treatment is focused on rejuvenation and self-reflection. Daily meditation is seen as key to strengthening the mind and one's sense of inner peace.
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consultation be immediate, she agreed despite being travel-worn. As the doctor examined the infection, Martha's breath became shallow with panic. She had always eschewed antibiotics, given the implications they have for one's overall system, but now she wondered if she'd been foolish to avoid them. "He wasn't alarmed, but I was," she recalls. Dr. Namboodiri calmly advised a treatment of herbal formulas to clear the infection. "I was humbled. This was supposed to be research, but I ended up being a patient." Rebecca's initial consultation was also disquieting. Though she had often experienced minor bloating after meals, she'd simply lived with the discomfort, assuming it was nothing serious. So when the doctor announced that her digestive issues were in fact chronic, Rebecca recalls, "I was really shocked. I didn't think it was so serious." Still, feeling she was in good hands, "I let go and trusted the process, and I put my health in his hands. I wanted to give myself to this

treatment and see if I can heal." Both women were quickly grasping that Panchakarma was going to require a giving over of control, a trust in their caregivers and a willingness to be physically and emotionally vulnerable. The holistic treatment would demand holistic surrender. **I**n order to prepare the body to expel built-up toxins, patients engaging in Panchakarma must first go through a process called Poorvakarma, which loosens internal contaminants by ingesting medicated ghee, or clarified butter, for anywhere from one to five days. The medicine dissolves the toxins and helps to move them along toward elimination. Ingesting their daily ghee—which Rebecca describes as "absolutely vile"—was a challenge. Each morning, they would watch quietly as the doctors engaged in a solemn ritual, praying over

Staff members remain incredibly attentive and in-tune with your healing process throughout your entire stay.
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spiritual calling, something that mother and daughter felt acutely. Silently, lovingly, the female attendants washed, massaged and dressed them in a pure expression of the Indian greeting namaskaram: “The light within me sees and recognizes the light within you.” The mundane becomes sacred, which distinguishes Ayurveda from other wellness practices: each individual is at once separate, yet a part of the oneness of creation.

By now, Martha’s leg infection had cleared after being treated topically and internally with herbal formulas made on site. But something else was happening on an emotional level that Martha—a successful businesswoman accustomed to control and high expectations of both herself and others—didn’t expect.

“I didn’t know I had all these shells I had actually built on my surface,” she says. “Once they started to shatter and break away, there was a day when I just broke down and cried and cried. A door opened, and the floods just came out.”

It was the first time she’d wept in more than 25 years.

Martha and Rebecca had a running joke about an imaginary honeymoon couple who had mistakenly booked a suite at Kalari Kovilakom, thinking it would be a romantic spa vacation.

“Let’s just say it’s not the most . . . sexy kind of holiday,” says Rebecca.

The second stage of treatment, Pradhanakarma, involves induced

the warm, herb-infused concoction. The first day, they accepted the small shot of ghee warily, yet respectfully: “We didn’t want to let them down.” Each morning the dosage increased until, on day five, Rebecca’s body was so saturated she could hold in the warm butter concoction no longer and had to hurriedly run out of morning yoga. Some patients’ fingernails tinged yellow as the ghee took hold. It was a sign that the treatment was working.

During that first week, they became accustomed to the stillness and asceticism of their environment. Patients are encouraged to eat silently, not facing each other so as to inspire conscious consumption. Each meal is customized for the individual according to his or her medical needs, and much of the all-organic fare is grown on the sprawling rural property. Caffeine, alcohol and meat are prohibited. Activity is limited to

quiet walks around the serene grounds, meditation and yoga.

The quiet and introspection require a shedding of identity. All patients’ personal items are put away; they are provided with identical white cotton garments and flip-flops. Even personal toiletries are banned. “All of your choices are made for you,” Rebecca recalls. “It was really hard to surrender that way.”

Instead of the internet, there was birdsong; rather than worldly distractions, the heat and smells and very air of the jungle stimulated an inward focus.

Both women were struck by the extraordinary level of care they received from the staff. Beyond the fact that there were approximately 80 staff members for just 18 suites, “We were blanketed and inundated with love,” says Martha. Ayurveda as a way of life is pervasive in this part of India, so the people who choose to work at Kalari Kovilakom do so as a



Traditional, holistic treatments, like their rejuvenation massage (above) or dhara therapy (right), are administered by highly trained specialists.

Opposite: Following the tradition of the Vengunad kings who once inhabited the structure, Kathakali dance and Carnatic music programs make up a part of the daily ritual at Kalari Kovilakom.

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“No matter how much it gets abused, the body can restore balance. The first rule is to stop interfering with nature.”

— DEEPAK CHOPRA

Dhara therapy, or the dripping of warm, medicated oils over the forehead, is perhaps the most well-known Ayurveda treatment. It is said to treat headaches, mental stress, insomnia and more.

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vomiting, purgation, nasal medication and/or medicated enemas—depending on the patient’s needs. The women reprised this story of the unwitting honeymooners trapped in an Indian detox hospital over and over as each day they experienced different medicines and therapies to encourage elimination. Emerging from this stage of treatment, Rebecca laughed, “Actually, we realized the moral is that if you can get through Panchakarma together, you can survive anything.”

Together, Martha and Rebecca not only got through it, but they also began to see each other in a new light as their facades and habitual roles fell away. Always close as mother and daughter, Rebecca didn’t expect that at this point in their lives anything between them would—or should—change. But the Ayurvedic experience, supported by love and care, demands physical and emotional vulnerability; it breaks you down to your essence. For two women solidly grounded in 21st century life with all of its noise and hustle and ever-

shifting roles and responsibilities, the silence and exposure were eye-opening and life-changing.

“It strips you of what you’ve created for yourself,” says Martha. “I didn’t expect that. We were seeing ourselves for our true selves.”

In their suite, the Malayali women spelled out “Martha” and “Rebecca” in flower petals on the fresh white bed linens. Lying in the soft light coming through the sheer curtains, the two breathed deeply, bonded in a way people become after a shared transformative experience.

“I stopped looking at Rebecca as my daughter or as *my* anything,” Martha recalls. “I just started to look at Rebecca as Rebecca. I valued this experience in the sense that I could see her vulnerability as a person, and I was so glad for her to see my vulnerability as a person.”

Rebecca, too, began to see their relationship as more fluid and rich. “When I needed her to be my mom, she was my mom; when I needed her to be my friend, she could be a friend; when I needed her to be a sister, she could be a

sister. I didn’t know a relationship could grow on so many levels. I thought you’d just have that one role, and that would be your place in someone’s life.” This new knowledge allowed for deep, mutual admiration to grow between the women, an excitement that they still had so much to learn from one another.

During the final week of Panchakarma, the treatments and food are offered in the spirit of rejuvenation. Daily yoga, meditation and Pranayama exercise are key to strengthening the body and mind. And, while it would have been easy once returning home to fall back into old patterns, both mother and daughter wanted to cherish their newfound consciousness. Before the experience, says Martha, “Little things would bother me. I thought the way to manage my life was to have these expectations that everything would have to be done a certain way. I now sometimes pause and think, ‘I used to get angry about this.’ I was inflammatory.”

Ongoing care from the staff at Kalari Kovilakom continued over email, and



Martha and her daughter, Rebecca, snap a photo with the staff at Kalari Kovilakom. They are dressed in the traditional white garments of the resort.

they practiced new ways of consciously consuming stimuli of any sort—food, noise, news, even other people’s emotions.

There was a learning curve for loved ones back in Switzerland who witnessed their dramatic change in lifestyle. “I think they may have thought, ‘Oh she’s having a little crisis,’” Rebecca laughs. “Someone goes to India and thinks they’re going to ‘find themselves.’”

But as her friends and family saw her commitment to her new way of life, they began to support and admire it. “I think they were quite shocked that it wasn’t something that was just a phase,” she says.

Now, she has friends calling her and asking for the retreat’s contact information.

The

gift of Panchakarma is a deep inner knowledge that allows the divine within you to speak and be heard. The message Martha and Rebecca brought home is this: we are all wonderful creations—each unique, yet connected in our oneness. This knowledge allows a practice of self-love that vanquishes the judgment and divisions that are so pervasive in modern life. Even now, more than three years later, the two continue to follow the dietary practices, meditation, breathing techniques and overall sense of balance they learned at Kalari Kovilakom. They remain conscious about what they take in and how the noise of modern life has the potential to drown out their hard-won inner peace.

“Ask yourself how much of who you are is a result of influence, or is it coming from your creation,” Martha advises. “Find your true being by reducing the outside stimulus in your life. Don’t be so afraid of silence.”

Who can argue that life in 2019 is indeed noisy, full of distraction and turmoil? Could it be that a 3,000-year-old healing philosophy contains the answers so many of us seek? According to Martha and Rebecca, the answer is decidedly yes. Because whatever term you use for that ephemeral thing you feel you lack—wellness, peace, happiness—it’s already within you. There’s no place like home because you are already there. ■

Each and every meal served at Kalari Kovilakom is personally crafted for the patient with all organic ingredients, taking into account their medical needs. PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF CGH EARTH AYURVEDA