

The Miracle of Ayurveda

Ancient Treatments for Modern Afflictions

by John Ahmed Herlihy

“For every disease on earth there is a corresponding cure in nature.”

(An Islamic Traditional Saying)

We may not live in an age of miracles, but that does not preclude their still occurring. Perhaps what we have lost is not the prevalence of miracles in our lives with the power to increase our faith and heighten our perception of reality; what we have lost is our ability to recognize and appreciate the significance of a miracle whenever we encounter the truly miraculous in today’s world.

This kind of miracle does not signal the abrupt overturning of the natural order and the arrival of the supernatural within the natural to reveal an ultimate truth that no one could otherwise deny. God knows we witness miracles everyday in the coming of the dawn, the descent of night and the stream of life that flows in between; and yet we never stop our frantic pace to answer their sacred summons with a moment of introspective silence to the mystery of the natural order and the holy enchantment that surrounds us. Only when it is forced upon us through sickness and affliction do we stop to consider a deeper reality beyond the world of sensation and superficiality that we live by during these times. Only when the reality of sickness and the possibility of death make their presence known do we pause to realize that neither we nor the world we live in are what they appear to be.

The miracle of Ayurveda¹ in our title represents a miraculous functioning of the natural order rather than some kind of overturning of nature and refers to a ‘science-of-life’ philosophy of health and well-being in India that dates back over 5,000 years. I recently returned from a three week stay at an Ayurvedic Medical Center about 70 kilometers outside of Cochin in the State of Kerala, an area in southern India just south of Goa. I had come down with an upper arm and shoulder injury playing competitive tennis and squash. When I first felt

the injury, I paid no attention to it. A devoted player doesn't stop playing everytime he feels some discomfort pain in his arm; but I soon realized that this pain was not going away. I stopped playing all racket sports for a few months only to realize that this ailment needed some serious medical attention.

At first I went to the doctor who ran me through all the usual tests, including x-ray for bone problems and MRI scanning for such things as arthritis or a torn ligament. When nothing showed up on the screens of the latest technology, I underwent several months of daily physical therapy, including ultrasound, heat and electrical treatments that are intended to relax and soothe what appeared to be inflammation of the muscles and a classic case of tendinitis. Rest and time will cure all ills, I was soberly told. After nearly two years of patient aggravation, however, I was beginning to wonder whether the pain and the limited extension of the arm would ever surrender to rest and time. Would I ever play tennis again or even have the normal use of my limb?

In consultation with a local Ayurvedic Center in Muscat, I decided to contact and book a room at the Vaidyaratnam Nursing Home 50 kilometers outside of Cochin in the heart of the Kerala countryside. The philosophy of Ayurvedic medicine was not unfamiliar to me. Dr. Deepak Chopra, a best-selling author and popular lecturer, draws much of his inspiration from its principles and to a degree has popularized its application in the US in recent years. I knew, for example, as many people probably know, that it is an alternative medicine that has ancient and traditional roots that originate in the state of Kerala in Southern India. I also knew that as in other alternative health practices that are available in China, Thailand and other Far Eastern countries, traditional massage forms the backbone of a number of therapies that are based on the theory that many human ailments arise from basically two things, poor circulation and toxicity of the blood stream. The variety of therapies aims to heal the root cause of illness rather than only to deaden the pain. In addition, I was familiar with the fact that Ayurvedic medicine has its own forms of prescriptive medicines that are based on the natural roots and herbs found in the nearby surroundings and have no side effects. Finally, the treatments could be described by using the two words everyone wants to hear: they are effective and inexpensive. My three-week stay at the Ayurvedic Center, including the room, the therapy, the medicines, all food and liquids came to less than 20,000 rupees.²

What I have come to learn about the Ayurvedic treatment through first-hand experience has turned into an unexpected personal awakening about the possibilities of such ancient alternative medicine. Ayurveda treats a broad range of ailments and afflictions affecting the blood circulation, muscle and nerve systems of the body. It employs traditional treatments including mud-pack bandaging, poultice and massage that affects not only muscles and nerves, but the entire nervous system and ultimately the brain itself, as I shall soon relate. It approaches the concept of sickness and cure with the age-old adage that both time and patience are fundamental to the healing process and that the quick fix of a drug or a pill is a modern Western myth that deadens the pain while it obscures the symptoms and the cure. It builds on the intelligence of the body to respond to the natural cures that exist in the world of nature and the ingenuity of a positive mind to support the body in this process of cure. Most importantly, it counsels the patient to adopt the right attitude toward the treatment including a belief

in its effectiveness, a willingness to try, a trust in the doctors to monitor and advise, and the establishment of a sacred interaction between the patient and the masseurs to effect the full course of the treatment and cure.

Ultimately, the Ayurvedic philosophy of approach to medicine and good health turns the entire process of ensuring health and well-being into an allegory of the outer quest of healing for the inner harmony of health. It is based on the ability of the body, mind, and soul to interact in such a way as to effect the totality of the human spirit through a holistic approach to the establishment of well-being within the person that is total and complete. If the body is sick, then the mind, soul and spirit need to take part in the process of healing and rejuvenation by way of compensation and balance. The holistic approach is essential in the Ayurvedic system of medicine. The body cannot be true to itself without the interaction of the mind, soul and spirit. Similarly, a healthy mind interacts and ultimately depends on a sound and healthy body to support it. The soul as summary and the spirit as substance reflect on physical and mental levels the essence of what lies within as the very best of the human being.

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Although I have travelled extensively in many parts of the globe, I had never been to India, so my imagination was running wild and my expectations were unsure and apprehensive. I landed in the seaside city of Cochin in the late afternoon and took a taxi about 50 kilometers into the interior of Kerala to the Vaidyaratnam Nursing Home,³ passing through dense tropical foliage, extensive forests of swaying coconut palms interspersed with and lush rice fields, a natural setting that gave the appearance of being wild and tameless. The anachronous Ambassador Deluxe taxi, squat and classic in the style of a sedan car of the late 40s, summoned thoughts of a bye-gone era, but the sight of the rich tropical landscape was already a balm to my soul since I was arriving from Muscat in the Sultanate of Oman where I live and work, a country in which the hot, humid climate and relentless desert sun provides no mercy and little relief to the arid and mountainous lunar landscape.

In marked contrast to Muscat and as an auspicious beginning in a region of the world where rain is considered a blessing, a torrential downpour complete with thunder and lightning provided a spectacular backdrop to this lush setting as we drove through the entrance arch and down the long driveway fringed with flowers and spreading lawns to the main building. In fact, the day of my arrival marked the first day of operation for this entirely new medical center whose traditions and roots pass back through father and son into the middle of the nineteenth century when, as the story goes, the great grandfather of the existing owner cured the ailment of a high ranking British official. When asked what he wanted in return, he asked for the honorary title Vaidyaratnam which remains to this day as the name of the center. Dr. Mooss, the present owner, director, and chief resident, who was known affectionately as “the old man” by the mostly local patients, had overseen the establishment of this new center to replace the much older and more traditional wooden building that had served the family for

most of the 20th century. The modern three-story building with wings to left and right was tucked away in this quiet, rural setting surrounded by lawns, fruit trees and of course the tall and stately coconut palms that provided the oil base for the treatments.

Beyond the elaborate entrance and through the great wooden doors lay a spacious reception area whose centerpiece contained two large photos of the father and grandfather of Dr. Mooss, photos bedecked with flower garlands that flanked a golden statue of the god of health and healing before which stood a golden urn inset with a burning candle that flickered in the breeze. It was in fact a sober setting that cast a hallowed and almost sacred ambiance to the business at hand, namely the healing of long-standing afflictions that seemingly have no other cure. When I entered the building and was quickly assigned in a simple well-appointed room with overhead fan on the second floor, I too joined this community of people in search of a cure that was intended for the patient and the serious-minded. Little did I know when I entered the premises that I was not to leave the building for the full extent of my three-week stay.

I had arrived on a Thursday evening and was no sooner settled into my room and unpacked when one of the young doctors visited me to advise me about the protocol of the moment. Dr. Mooss was scheduled to visit the patients that evening and would conduct a consultation with me. He told me that I had arrived on an opportune day as treatments traditionally start on Tuesday and Friday, these days being considered propitious for the commencement of a cure. I was later to come to understand just how sacred an undertaking the doctors, nurses, and masseurs who administer the various treatments consider their vocation of healing to be. Of a sacred and symbolic significance were the rectangular medallions painted across the forehead and throat of the Brahmin doctors effected with a mixture of colored powder and water. The vibrant colors red and yellow gave the appearance of a hieroglyphic cartouche and served to refresh the eyes (for powers of observation) and the voice (for the purposes of advice and prescription) of the doctor. Later, a patient told me that the doctors regularly the Hindu temple that lay just on the other side of the road beyond the gates of the center, the business of healing being for them a sacred trust. I was advised by this young doctor to give Dr. Mooss a small amount of money as a traditional symbolic gesture at the commencement of the cure.

After a simple meal of several chipattis with curry sauce and salad served to me in the room, Dr. Mooss and his entourage of doctors and nurses arrived to consult with me about my ailment. Somewhere near 80 years old but giving the appearance of being in his mid-sixties, he received me graciously with a smile and a nod, dressed in a shirt, a white doctor's coat and wrapped in a floor length white dhoti which is the traditional dress of the area. The young doctors and attendants deferred to his every utterance and the patients sat patiently in their rooms during the course of his twice-weekly visitations respectfully awaiting his arrival. Nothing was done without his permission.

With a thoroughness that one would expect from this setting, Dr. Mooss wanted to know the full history of my ailment in all its detail including the kind of climate I lived in and how well I slept. I explained to him that

I had a weakness in the upper arm and what appeared to Western doctors as tendinitis of the shoulder with limited extension of the right arm. He listened carefully, asking questions about the kind of pain, the extent, the length and duration of the ailment, my dietary habits and movements, all crucial components that contributed to his prognosis. He then consulted with his assistants in rapid-fire Malayalam, which is the local language of that area of India. He spoke fluent English of course, but I had great trouble understanding him, as I had with many others while I was there in Kerala, because they spoke English with the same speed that they spoke their own language and with an intonation that was so strange and unique that it actually sounded like foreign language. In many instances, to cover my confusion and inability to understand my own native tongue and to avoid embarrassing them as well since they all seemed to pride themselves on their linguistic ability, I resorted to the trick that they themselves use so often, the shaking of the head from side to side that seems to outsiders so comical with Indians from the Sub-continent, but that I discovered was an effective body language that covered all questions of doubt and effectively conveyed a feeling of assurance, even when you didn't have a clue what was said. When Dr. Mooss shook his head back and forth smiling his reassurance as he left my room, I knew that I had arrived and was now on the road to recovery.

A “minimum” stay at the nursing home usually consisted of a full four weeks and often longer for more serious conditions such as arthritis and paralysis. Because I had only three weeks leave from work, however, and because my ailment wasn't considered as serious as some of the other patients, an exception was made in my case and an accelerated three-week program was set up by Dr. Mooss under the constant supervision of the other doctors and implemented by the attending masseurs and nurses. The heart of many of the treatments calls for internal medicines consisting of the herbs, oils, and roots grown locally in the surrounding countryside, various kinds of massages using hot oils and a strict vegetarian diet. I could have no fried foods, no fruits except boiled bananas, no chemicals and no preservatives.⁴ The food was brought around to the rooms on a cart that was delivered from a canteen nearby that exclusively serviced the building with special preparations. Gratefully, coffee and tea were permitted in this otherwise austere dietary regime.

The next morning, on Friday, my first week of treatment began with the small bottle of liquid medicine that I was obliged to drink twice a day after breakfast and supper. The sight of this dark brown mixture promised to be a misery, so I prepared myself for the warm bitter taste and its harsh afterglow. Down the hatch I thought, as I drank the bitter brew. The evening medicine was a milky concoction with a suspicious aftertaste that quickly turned my eyes heavy and made me feel tired. Although much mystery surrounded these medicines, the procedures, the regulations and the treatments, through persistent questioning I was able to resolve some of the mystery and glean the rationale behind the medicinal brews and daily treatments. Variations depended on the individual of course, but in general, the liquid medicines were intended to purge the bodily system of all toxicity, promote regularity, reduce the fat content of the body and lower cholesterol, neutralize pain, and provide either a hot or cold balance to the system in addition to addressing the particular body type and problem of the individual.

I suspect the nighttime medicine contained a sleeping draught and a purgative, since the doctors were always concerned on their twice-daily visitations to ask about sleep and regularity, which they considered vital to the curative process.

My first massage treatment was scheduled for that Friday afternoon and would take place every day thereafter for the course of the first week, when another consultation would be held with Dr. Mooss when he could establish the extent of the benefit and the future course of treatment for each succeeding week. As I passed through the door of the treatment room, I entered a strange and mysterious world of sights and sounds that immediately assailed all my senses with the full force of their alien charm. The ancient smells of pine and tree sap, the dark herbal aroma of the warm oils, the melodious chanting of sacred Sanskrit sutras in the background, the burning candle casting flickering shadows in front of the little altar to the god of healing, the prolonged rays of the setting sun illuminating the treatment board, all these elements cast an exotic spell over my senses and created an atmosphere of tranquility and otherworldliness that under the circumstances of the treatment was unique to experience. The room itself had open doors that led onto a balcony beyond which was a sight to behold, and I thought: There can be no peace like the peace engendered by the vision of this natural bucolic setting, a peace drawn from the lush, verdant fields that were encroached upon from left and right by a verge of palm groves consisting of exceptionally tall and stately palms that swayed majestically in the wind. It was the peace of the old well I saw in the distance, of grazing cattle, of cranes in flight, of thatched huts, pet goats and distant farmers tending the land.

But for a bit of string and a flimsy cloth to cover the private parts, I lay down on a wood platform hewn from a single tree trunk. Beyond at the foot of this massive plank and set to the side was a burning flame and a kind of wok where the oils were heated and kept hot by an attendant. I was initially doused completely in hot oil and underwent a full body massage performed simultaneously by two people for five or ten minutes while my head was completely covered in hot oil by another attendant. I was also being treated for some slight congestion in the ears and thus warm oil was also dropped from a distance into each of the ears. Thus bodily assaulted, I was then subjected to what was referred to as the “bundle massage”.

The bundle massage consisted of a poultice made of cloth stuffed with herbs and a special kind of rice with medicinal properties. Several of these unique “bundles” were prepared and dropped into the hot oil of the wok and then lightly pounded and spread up and down the arm and across the shoulder area in question, alternating between bundles as the hot oil at the base of the poultice cooled below a certain temperature. This procedure continued for another fifty minutes or so to complete the hour. Thereafter, I was helped into an adjacent bathroom. I need to be helped I should say, as the effect of the oil on the head and the pounding and stroking of the body and arm left me feeling groggy and relaxed to the point of exhaustion. This style of massage was said to soften the muscles. Once inside the bathroom, I was advised to pour warm water over myself in what amounted to an Indian-style bath. An attendant mixed an herbal powder with hot water to create a mud paste that was to be

rubbed across the entire body to cut the herbal oil of the massage. Throughout the course of the three-week treatment, no chemicals were to be used at all, including all soaps, creams, deodorants and body sprays. Having completed the bath, I was then escorted back to my room and seen safely inside by the attendant who departed only after requesting permission in simple English to take his leave.

In following this treatment, my first week passed without incident. In fact, I had to settle into a very limited routine within the confines of the nursing home and found myself deprived of the usual outlets that I am accustomed to in the normal course of a very active life. I was encouraged to “rest” as an important component of the treatment although I wasn’t sure how that was to be accomplished; in any event I was told that I could not leave the building at all. Upon questioning, I learned from the doctors who humored my questions that, among other reasons, because of the hot oil treatment to the head, they didn’t want me to have direct sunlight. The patients in general were instructed not to expose themselves to the elements outside so as not to catch any unwanted illnesses during the treatment by becoming overheated, causing excessive sweating and possibly catching cold.

In addition, I had to grow quickly accustomed to completely different foods and spices since all patients followed a strictly vegetarian diet cooked in the South Indian style, which can be strangely seasoned and spicy. Similarly, restrictions prevented me from having any fried foods, eggs, fruits, sweets and the like, although coffee and tea were permitted. A food cart came around to service the rooms. Breakfast consisted of *dosha*, a flat rice-based pancake look-a-like cooked on a dry skillet or *edili*, a kind of rice bun both of which were dipped into curry and/or chutney sauce. Lunch came in a tiffin of multiple containers, one for soup, one for rice, and the other two containing vegetable curry or *dahl* (boiled lentils). The evening cart came around at 7:30 for the final meal of the day, consisting of several chipattis with which to scoop up a thimble-full of salad and a soupy vegetable *kurma* (a form of curry). These three meals, plus early morning coffee and afternoon tea, soon came to punctuate my day, the smells of the cart and its squeaky wheels signaling its arrival. I lost two kilos the first week and nearly 5 kilos for the entire stay.

While I never got used to the sparse and repetitive vegetarian cuisine, I soon grew accustomed to the multiple sights and sounds of the exotic India that formed my immediate and only surroundings. There was forever the sound of tabla, finger cymbals, and percussion forming the rhythmic pulse of the day coming from I knew not where exactly, from other rooms, from random farm houses in the area perhaps, from the Hindu temple nearby. An eerie quality often characterized the music in which the haunting melody of a solitary flute or the contemplative rhythm of the sitar floated into consciousness seemingly from some remote location. I sometimes heard a recording of chanted sutras coming from the nearby temple in the early morning before dawn, its compelling, otherworldly quality lulling the mind into a meditative trance. Beyond my window, there was an active world of nature. The voice of the crow, the chipmunk, the woodpecker, the crickets and the relentless insects all spoke their own tongues and went about their business in their own inimitable fashion. In

this rarefied setting, I began to enjoy and appreciate the simple pleasures that awaited my attention.

There was an unspoken aura of exotic mystery that formed the backcloth on one's wakeful moods. The odor of burning incense, flowers in bloom, ripening fruits and hot oils permeated the air with its heavy aromatic quality so characteristic and distinctive of India. The night train to Madras and Mumbai signaled its passage in the near distance at some late-night hour as I dozed off to sleep thinking of its passage into far-off, alien worlds. The whistle sent forth a call with the heart and purpose of a far-distant horn, the distinctive rattling of its iron feet on endless rails reminded me that people were rushing headlong to exotic destinations into the dark and otherwise silent night.

During the daytime, it was the sight of the women dressed in their saris that never failed to fascinate me, with their variety of color and formal elegance, highlighting the use of a traditional dress that has not yet lost its functionality and charm. I was told by a Goan woman amused by my interest that the sari consists of a one-piece five meter length of cloth that is pleated for comfort and movement, carefully wrapped around the body and then draped over the left shoulder to hang down as a train flowing in the wind. All the women still wear the sari at every age and from every walk of life. The female doctors and nurses wore white saris under their white medical coats. They must have been hot working thus attired in that hot tropical climate but never appeared so. The female masseurs wore sky blue saris. I noticed a woman tending the lawns and garden in her svelte black sari and two female sweepers clearing the front driveway of fallen leaves. The visitors of the patients wore elaborate and multi-colored saris each with their own distinctive flair. The two women who cleaned my room every day wore colorful, stylish saris as they swept the room clean of insects and debris with a makeshift broom made of sticks and twigs.

From my second floor window, I was able to look down into the backyard of a nearby farmhouse. The area was bestrewn with fruit trees, the inevitable banana trees and various kinds of shrubbery. One hot, sunny afternoon, I noticed a young woman dressed in a dark green sari with a bold orange bodice who had just come into the back yard. She was dark, capable and sturdy looking. She had obviously been working in another part of the garden and looked hot and sweaty; yet the rough cotton sari hung across her body in all its distinctive elegance even though it constituted her working clothes. As I looked out into her strange world, our eyes met. Briefly in passing, she had noticed this alien being who was myself looking down at her from the open window. With folded hands, she bowed her head and sent forth this simple gesture of greeting. She then proceeded to gather together and expertly tie up the various branches and shrubs that had recently been trimmed from the fruit trees. Once readied, she threw a bundled cloth over her head, set the massive bundle of branches on top of it and departed, the flowing train of the sari hung down from her left shoulder and accentuated her stately attitude and noble bearing as she left the yard. It is at such moments that one observes the value of a tradition upheld.

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The second week marked a turning point in the treatment. On the next Thursday evening after the completion of the first week of treatment, I once again consulted with Dr. Mooss concerning the progress of my condition. He wanted to know in detail how I felt and whether I had experienced any improvement. I expressed surprise and told him that indeed my condition had considerably improved in such a short time, estimating for him that I felt roughly 30 to 40 percent better. “Then you can take some credit for that,” he told me good-humoredly, “since half the battle lies with the patient himself.” In fact, the Ayurvedic philosophy sets much store in the attitude of the patient and the close positive interaction of the mind and body. He consulted with his entourage of doctors both male and female and scrutinized their hand-written notes. They had visited me during the course of the previous week and were well familiar with my condition and progress. He then prescribed the new course of treatment. I was to continue with the bundle massage of the previous week, but this week I would be toweled free of the oils after the massage and would no longer take a head or body bath. In addition, two new therapeutic variations would commence, namely a nightly bandage and a procedure called in Sanskrit *nasiyam*.

That sounded ominous as well as ancient. I inquired what the word meant and was told that *nasiyam* was “the hot oil nose treatment”. Dr. Mooss and his entourage were sensitive to the alien nature of the treatment and assured me that the procedure would be fully explained to me when appropriate and that I was not to worry. The treatment lasted for a minimum of three days to five days I was told, and in some cases a maximum of a full seven day course. I ultimately received the full seven day treatment.

The next afternoon, I had the bundle massage and head oil treatment a little earlier to allow time for the *nasiyam* treatment followed at 6:00 pm by the bandage application. This was turning into a full time job, although gratefully it kept me busy. Immediately after the massage, I was escorted back down to my room with the attending masseur and doctor who would perform the “oil in the nose” procedure. I was laid down on the bed with a pillow under my neck, thus arching my head backward to facilitate the entry of the warm oil into the nasal canal. I was advised to breathe inward while the oil was carefully poured into first the right then the left side of the nose. I set a standard of bravery by way of expectation that surprised even myself, but was almost disappointed to discover that while there was some discomfort, there was nowhere near the pain and outrage that I expected my nose or inner nasal passages to experience. At best, the warm oil quickly dripped down the canals and lodged into the back of the mouth and throat whence I was told to quickly expel it into a cup. Once accomplished, the doctor began to thoroughly massage my forehead and face, while the masseur rubbed hands and feet to create warmth and circulation at the extremities, all the while I was instructed to breathe in deeply and then expel as much phlegm and mucus as possible. The action of the hot oil passing through the inner sanctum of the nose created an internal flow within the sinuses and air pockets of the face and skull that facilitated the expulsion of unwanted mucus and fluid from the entire area of the skull.

This amounted to a nervous system and brain treatment that complemented the hot oil treatment to the head. Upon inquiry, I was told by an obliging doctor that there were inner corridors of nerves and nerve endings that passed from the brain through the nasal and sinus area down into the right and left side of the body. In my case, this treatment was called for because they had estimated that the limited extension of the arm and the atrophy of the shoulder were caused in part by a blockage of the flow of energy through the nervous system. I was told that a side benefit of this treatment would be none other than a sensation approximating “clarity of mind”.

Indeed, as the days of “oil in the nose” treatment proceeded through their full seven day course, I felt an increasing clarity of mind and a heightened consciousness on some sort of physiological rather than psychological level of experience. I can only compare it to what a person experiences when he has wax in the ear that is subsequently blown clean. There is a clarity of sound within the ear that approximates perhaps what would be like hearing the primordial quality of every sound, as if for the first time. Toward week’s end, I felt that my mind has gradually acquired a sparkingly clear “presence” that was astounding to experience, as if I had finally emerged after all these years from a dark cloud to witness the first dawn of man, and I felt ready as never before to experience the crisp primal quality inherent in the life of the mind.

The over-night bandage was the final insult of the day. At 6:00 pm, I returned to the treatment room to have the cloth bandage wrapped around my arm and shoulder. It consisted of an elaborate cotton cloth wrapping that was coated from top to bottom in a heated mudpack of herbal medicines. After heating this dark mixture in the wok, an attendant spread it across the cloth bandage as if he were frosting a cake. He then laid its hot and moist contents over my right arm and shoulder and secured its entire length with cotton wrapping. Then, the fresh leaves of the castor oil plant were laid upon the arm and another clothing wrapping was tightly secured up and down the arm. The entire appendage was tied in place by a series of strings that wound around my other shoulder and arm. Thus trussed up like a chicken ready for roasting and moving about like Frankenstein before his bandages were removed, I was sent back to my room for a meager evening meal followed by a milky bottle of medicine that soon induced a sleepiness to coincide with a 10:00 pm bedtime.

The mudpack bandage, designed to strengthen the muscles of the arm and draw out any toxic poisons, was to remain in place for a full 12 hours until an attendant came around to my room to take it off at 6:00 in the morning. At first, an alarming series of rashes and boils appeared on the upper arm and shoulder, but applications of medicated ghee soon made these unsightly eruptions disappear. This awkward and uncomfortable treatment continued every night until I left the nursing home.

In this way I passed my second week. In addition to experiencing these ancient treatments and feeling their benefit, I also learned the meaning of the relativity of time. During the nose treatment, I was told by the doctors that I would not be able to read or watch television. To use the eyes in any serious way would seriously compromise the sensitive nature of this particular treatment and therefore I was instructed to halt all visual

activity and rest. I looked at the doctor and thought: Do I know the meaning of the word? What is rest and how is it accomplished? By denying me the pleasure of reading, a quiet companion on even the worst of days, I felt that the last vestige of my conscious awareness to “occupy myself was taken away from me. Without any external or mental stimulus, I was finally left on my own with the silence of the inward self.

The sense of time changes. Time rushing forward as in our daily lives becomes suddenly time in amplitude, moving forward second by second and minute by minute as in the uninterrupted flow of a slow moving river, forever changing, never static, always endless. Time is spread out before me like a tableland; the day becomes a field or meadow through which I wander about and roam unattended, without the props that give shape and definition to the normal course of a life such as the stimulus of books and films, the support of friends, and the satisfaction of work. As I reminded myself of the two key points of departure of this traditional form of therapy, namely faith in recovery and an open-minded receptivity to its slow and natural process, I resolved to rest as the doctor had advised and drifted off increasingly into the life of the mind and spirit. I was no longer thinking and planning and executing my desires, for I had nothing to ponder, plan or do. Instead, my imagination set forth like a cinema reel or a player piano. The pictures of the mind, its thoughts, memories or impressions, along with a wide range of heightened and conflicting emotions, played themselves out on their own, as though they had a will of their own that were disconnected from my true self.

I was determined to see the course of this treatment through to the end, and this determination helped me to overcome the feelings of frustration and impatience I felt during the course of the second week. When in doubt or on the brink of I knew not what, I set my gaze to the world of nature beyond my window whose message reflected the broad expanse of an eternal time, a world of nature I know that reflects and remembers a world of nature I do not know. Reduced to the bare bones of my inner self and the sinewy branches of the magnificent tamarind tree I see through my window, it was as though another person was standing on the threshold of another world, where one could refresh the anxieties of the soul as well as the afflictions of the body with the sense of the sacred and the eternal that is embedded as a first principle within every tree and cloud.

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** ‘Do you know what time it is?’ I suddenly heard the clear crisp intonation of a British accent on my right. ‘Yes,’ I said and looked down to see a young Indian boy sitting next to me? ‘Would you be kind enough to tell me what it is,’ he politely asked. He was deadly serious about his inquiry and didn’t crack even the hint of a boyish grin. ‘It’s cartoon time,’ I replied and changed the TV channel to the cartoon network. He laughed happily. It was only then that I noticed that he was a boy with a crooked smile. **

I was the only Westerner, indeed the only foreigner receiving treatment at the Ayurvedic center. The

rest of the patients were local Keralites with a few others from other city centers such as Madras or Bangalore. Therefore, I was something of a novelty among the local patients. Interest in me ranged from curiosity, to shyness, to panic, to outright fear and most people kept a discreet distance as though I were an alien from another planet. One little fellow who was running around the halls in the buff with a little gold belt hanging down from his waist came up to me, grimaced and then burst into tears before finding refuge in his mother's skirts, and she also seemed dubious and uncertain. But little Manu was different. Only eight years old, he had come down from Mumbai with his young father to be treated for facial paralysis that left the right side of his face, not to mention his smile, in ruins.

Each floor had a central lounge equipped with satellite TV where people could congregate together to socialize and watch television. I sometimes spent time there as an alternative to the seclusion of my room and eventually I did get to know a few of the other patients and learned of their ailments and treatments. Due to the length of time involved in these treatments, the center had a well-conceived arrangement in which spouses, children, or a relative could actually stay with the patient in the room. In this way, husbands stayed with ailing wives, fathers or mothers stayed with their young children and visitors abounded at all hours of the day or night. I of course was on my own and welcomed the companionship of this little fellow.

Over time, I noticed that Manu was becoming increasingly attached to me and under the circumstances I to him. Whenever I appeared in the communal area, he always sat quietly next to me. If I were talking with another patient, he would come up and sit between us listening attentively, as if something vital were being conveyed that he could not bear to miss. Manu had had a number of Western-style operations before his father turned to Ayurvedic treatment as a final alternative. 'One day when they were drawing fluid from Manu's spine,' he father related to me, 'I told them to stop. I couldn't bear the pain any more.' 'And Manu?' I asked. 'He never uttered a sound,' he told me.

One day, Manu, which means man in ancient Sanskrit, came running up and took me by the hand. 'Come with me,' he said affirmatively in his clipped accent, 'I will be your guide.' He escorted me up to the top floor where he proudly showed me the elevator engine and the array of solar panels that lined the outside roof like sunbathers on a beach. On the backside of the roof there was a small balcony overlooking the grand expanse of rice fields and coconut palm groves. We often stayed up there together in mid-afternoon before our treatments to pass the time. He named all the animals that he saw in the fields, including the white crane who was the companion, Manu told me, to the cow. 'Why is that, Manu?' I asked him. 'The crane always stands next to the cow all day and feeds on the insects and flies that hovered near him.' 'That's thoughtful,' I said and Manu shook his head back and forth Indian-style.

He talked to me about his interests, his friends, and his little world. He was something of a linguist at that young age. He spoke impeccable English with a British accent because he went to an English medium school, but he was at home with Hindi because of his upbringing in Mumbai, and he spoke Malayalam, the

language of Kerala, which was his mother tongue. He told me about the *nasiyam* nose treatment he had also undergone and advised me not to swallow the oil. ‘It will make you sick,’ he warned. He taught me a number of words in Malayalam such as ‘please’ and ‘thank you’ that were later to thrill the nurses and masseurs who tended me. In this way, Manu became my teacher as well as my guide.

The other acquaintance who “made the difference” during my stay was a young woman from Goa in her early 30s who had come down to Kerala to study veterinary medicine and had worked as a village doctor in the area for a number of years. Apparently, she had overcome any inhibitions she may have had to speak to the man “from another planet” and I soon looked forward to meeting with her in the late morning to compare notes about our treatments and ask her the many questions I had about India, its culture and its people. She also became a vital source of information about the practice of Ayurveda, the local culture, the various religions and languages and much else of interest about this vast, mysterious and elusive country.

Fabiana Lobo had suddenly and inextricably been struck down with rheumatoid arthritis over a year earlier affecting the joints of her left hand and legs and after various treatments, she decided to turn to the Ayurveda cure. ‘In Western medicine, they advise you to learn how to live with the pain and give you some pills. With Ayurveda,’ she told me, ‘you need faith, patience and endurance, but at the expense of these virtues, you are promised a complete and lasting cure.’ She walked slowly with a limp and her left hand was a clenched fist. Her treatments of course were much different from mine. She underwent, for example, the buttermilk treatment in which cool buttermilk was systematically poured over her head in the treatment room for a full hour to cool her body and douse the flames of her swollen joints. She also underwent a whole series of purgatives and had to take many more medicines throughout the course of her day than I did. As with Manu, I was struck by her courage in facing the reality of her ailment, by her trust in the treatment, and by her determination to see it through and overcome its overwhelming odds.

As I entered my third week of treatment, I was beginning to realize that, in spite of the hardship, tedium and restrictions required to see the treatment through, there was an ancient integrity to the process of healing and an inviolable completeness to the approach and possibility of cure. In talking with others, I realized that we all passed through a variety of emotions, including loneliness, bewilderment and frustration. At odd hours of the day and night, I heard the inconsolable crying of an old paralyzed man who stayed overhead on the top floor. These mixed emotions became as palpable as a mist that melted together into a profound feeling of hope in the promise of a cure. By the beginning of the third week, I had considerably improved and that only compounded the transforming quality of my patience and determination. I advised Dr. Mooss and the other doctors that I had made a 75% recovery.

The treatment shifted in emphasis once again during the third and final week. Gratefully, the full 7-day course of the *nasiyam* nose procedure was now complete and I was reaping the benefits of this rarefied treatment to the head and nervous system. I continued with the inconvenience of the mud-pack bandage feeling profound

relief in the early morning when the pack was set aside and my arm set free, to be briefly massaged with a warm oil to revitalize the circulation. My ears had cleared and a dryness to the forehead that I had complained about earlier had completely cleared up.

The bundle massage of the first two weeks was now terminated and replaced with a full body hot oil massage with continued special attention to my right shoulder and arm. For this, I was seated in a chair in the treatment room for a full hour with a turban wrapped around my head as herbally medicated hot oil seeped into the head and brain cavity. This treatment gave me the opportunity to gaze beyond the open door to the balcony of the treatment room at the meadows and palm groves that surrounded the building, a scene that never failed to fill me with the higher sentiments of contentment and peace. The setting sun drenched everything in the magic of its fading light as if the slanting ray fell in prostration across the land in tribute to the dying day. As I gazed contemplatively at this sublime wonderland, I entered its otherworldly ethos and the power of its enduring message entered me.

When the treatment neared its end after my long, three-week confinement, I needed to seek permission from the authorities to leave and make formal arrangements for my discharge from the nursing home. Dr. Mooss, highly respected by everyone for creating this environment and for the quality of treatment he provided his patients, came several days before my scheduled departure for one final consultation. I told him that I had achieved a 90% improvement in my condition, and he assured me that within a short time of perhaps several weeks, any restriction in the arm and shoulder would completely disappear. I felt then and now know that he was right. I was provided with a month's worth of both external herbal oils and internal herbal medicine to continue the treatment on my own as the final follow-up phase to the entire process of this Ayurvedic treatment and cure.

As it always has from the ancient past to the modern present, the unfolding drama of alternating sickness and health continues to be experienced as a metaphor of the human condition. We learn of balance and harmony through the experience of disparity and discord, the fragility of the human body highlights in contrasts the strength of the human spirit, the manifest evil of human sickness foretells the blessed well-being of health. It is a human drama that most of us would like to escape, but cannot any more than we can escape the yes and no of life, its polarities, its contradictions, and its final resolution in the way of some ultimate and enduring truth.

Undoubtedly, despite all of the advances in science and modern medicine, there is much about ourselves and the modern world that we still do not understand. The cause of sickness with its silent and unexpected arrival, and the possibility of its ultimate cure with its dark and mysterious promise, continue to elude us in today's world in spite of ourselves and our good intentions. Perhaps that is why the knowledge of an ancient and effective treatment still endures as a force to be reckoned with and still inspires people to appreciate the knowledge of traditional medicine and to turn to its holistic approach and restorative properties. My encounter with the Ayurvedic philosophy of health and well-being began with a faith in the traditional knowledge of these ancient treatments and ended with the certainty that comes with the restored feeling of health and well-being.

The morning of my departure, a happy day by any account after having successfully undergone three rigorous weeks physical, mental and spiritual therapies, was tinged with a feeling of sadness at leaving my three newfound friends behind. Fabiana the veterinary doctor with the clinched arthritic hand, Manu, the little boy with the crooked grin, and his father had all insisted on being awoken at 4:00 in the morning to see me off in a taxi to return directly to the airport for an early morning flight back to Muscat. Our brief encounter over the last three weeks had been close and intense in the manner of people who are confined for a period of time and pass through a hardship together. Like trains passing in the night, I was on my way back into a world far distant from theirs in more ways than one, but this brief encounter had enjoined us together in a shared experience that would forever be remembered.

We all passed through the shadowy reception area downstairs and out into the dark night, outside once again in the natural elements of fresh air and clear open space for the first time since my arrival three weeks earlier. We exchanged pleasantries and promises to write to fill the awkward moments as we waited for the taxi to arrive, but Manu, never at a loss for words in a variety of languages, held out his hand to offer me a gift. It was a simple key chain from which hung a glass ball.

‘It has a compass inside the ball,’ he advised me soberly. ‘Indeed it does,’ I said, taking note that it accurately indicated North where I knew it to be. “If you get lost, it will show you the way,” he said and for one final moment I took in the brave little face and crooked grin.

“Thank you, Manu, I may need it someday,” I replied with my own broken smile and climbed into the back seat of the antiquated car.

With the scent of jasmine filling the air and the light of a waning moon drenching the tropical landscape with its pale magic, I took my leave of the nursing home. Passing once again under the grand archway, the car drove through the great wooden gates and made its way beyond the darkness of night toward the glow of distant light that marked the coming of dawn.

¹ *Veda* means ‘science’ in the traditional sense of the word in the original Sanskrit, namely true, higher knowledge.

² An incredible account by any reckoning. At the time of this visit, the Indian rupee traded at roughly 47 to the US dollar.

³ I later advised the senior physician how misleading the term ‘nursing house’ would be in the West where people would immediately think of an old age institution, but he assured me that in India the term meant what it said, a place where continuous nursing and medical attention was available and nothing more.

⁴ I neither smoke nor drink, therefore both were habits I did not have to give up. For those who do, however, these habits are strictly forbidden during the treatment and during the advisory rest period after the treatment.