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## Finding Bliss Beneath a Coconut Canopy

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**F**reshly back from an absolutely splendid experience at Ananda's first annual Ayurvedic Healing and Yoga Retreat in India, I can't resist sharing some impressions and insights. My wife, Diksha, and I led two fabulous weeks at the Somatheeram Ayurvedic Beach Resort near Trivandrum, the capital of Kerala in southwestern India. Consistently been voted the best Ayurvedic resort in Kerala, Somatheeram is a tropical paradise situated on the shores of the Arabian Sea: coconut palm trees everywhere, shading the clean, beautifully kept grounds. Winter days are warm (shorts and sandals, day and night) and somewhat humid, perfect for Ayurvedic treatments. And everything about Somatheeram is designed to facilitate a healing experience.



### Making It Your Own

**Day #1, 7:00 A.M.**—We arrived last night and, after being greeted with fresh watermelon juice (ahhh!), immediately went to bed. This morning I feel no jet lag at all. Could it be the soothing lullaby of the ocean waves, serenading me all night long? It sure is a lovely sound.

I walk down the grassy slope from my cabin to the beach overlook to energize prior to meditating. Beautiful music is coming from the nearby fishing village below and to my left—sweet and haunting Indian music, very devotional, and yet it's somehow non-Indian as well.

I notice a steady trickle of people, mostly women in brightly colored saris, walking in ones and twos, pilgrim-like, from the village to a place just behind the palm trees to my right. They disappear for several minutes, then reappear and walk back toward the village. What is it? A Hindu shrine? Whatever it is, it's obviously special to them. The attitude of reverence is palpable.

I later learn that the shrine is Christian, and the music came from a church. Twenty percent of Keralans are Christian, including most of this fishing village. Well, how about that?! As the days go by, the Westerners Diksha and Gyandev meet dark-skinned Indians named Peter, Matthew, Thomas, Shirley, and Sophia. Somehow, this “mix-up” makes me feel closer to them; maybe they feel it, too.

Invariably, when something is transplanted to a new culture, the new hosts “make it their own,” changing it according to their own nature. Keralans have done this with Christianity, and Westerners are doing it with Yoga. The question is not *whether* there will be changes—it's inevitable—but *how* it will be done. Will it be according to the new hosts' best traits, or their not-so-good traits? The Keralans added to Christianity their own quiet, innocent, deeply personal devotion. It's beautiful. I don't think that most Westerners are doing as good a job with adopting Yoga, but it's still new to us, so there's always hope.

Ultimately, however, the real question is not what the culture does, but what individuals do. For example, as each one of us makes Ananda Yoga our own, which of our traits shape the process? Our habits? Desires? Restlessness? Comfort zones? Concerns over what others think? Or is it our discrimination, sincerity, and intuition? Will we use this powerful practice to reinforce habits that we should instead be changing, or will we use it to help make those changes?

Consider, for example, the creative, “can do” attitude that so typifies America. Yogananda often praised that attitude, expressing it as: “If it can be done, we can do it. And if it's impossible, we can still do it; it just might take a little longer.” When this translates into an optimistic, committed approach to Yoga—or any other endeavor, for that matter—it's invaluable.



*Each of us received a blessing—and the traditional “dot” on the forehead—in a special welcome ceremony on our first day.*



On the other hand, when the “can do” attitude leads to a superficial approach that glosses over important subtleties, it’s not helpful. And when it leads to the assumption, “If it *can* be done, then it *should* be done,” we can end up, as the saying goes, “fixing something that ain’t broke.” Let’s face it: something that’s more than 5,000 years old and still working extremely well (e.g., Yoga) probably has some features worth appreciating and keeping.

Similarly, the creative spirit can lead to a powerful, dynamic fit between an individual and the yoga techniques. This is certainly a good thing; we need to make our practice “our own.” But on the other hand, misguided creativity can, and often does, lead to change merely for the sake of change, or to creating a new yoga “style” for purposes of marketability, but without the guidance of wisdom—and therefore without lasting benefit.

Fortunately, individuals can do what cultures rarely do: practice discrimination, step by step. Rather than bending something new to fit into—and perhaps reinforce—our pattern of likes and dislikes, we can continually ask, “What does it *need* to be?” Then we can listen for the answer coming from deep inside.

Swami Kriyananda (Ananda’s founder) has often remarked that Mozart’s greatness lay in the fact that he seemed always to ask the question, “What does the music *need* to be?” rather than “What do I *want* it to be?” He would *listen* for the music rather than try to create it egoically. When we apply that idea to Ananda Yoga, God has a chance to enter our practice and help us make it the best it can be. Then our yoga practice will take us where we really want to go.

**Memo to myself:** Observe my own yoga practice more vigilantly. Watch for areas where habit, lethargy, or lack of mindfulness takes precedence over discrimination, inspiration, and a sense of eager, attentive, sensitive exploration.



Here I am after an Ayurvedic treatment—awake and ready, all parts fully oiled. It’s a rough job, but somebody has to do it!

### Discovering a New Level of Relaxation

**Day #2, 3:00 P.M.**—I’ve just had the first of my daily interviews with an Ayurvedic physician. After a detailed examination, he “diagnosed” my Ayurvedic constitution and

designed a Rejuvenation Therapy treatment program for me. Now I’m into my first session, tailored to the diagnosis.

It’s very different from any massage I’ve had. Two sweet young men, trained Ayurvedic therapists, work on me simultaneously, in silence. The only sounds are the birds and the ocean.

They definitely get a workout, though they don’t press hard unless I request it (and I do). At one point, one of them uses his foot to massage me, over and over from my fingertips



With my therapists, Unni and Sumesh.

down to my toes in one long, smooth stroke, while he holds onto an overhead rope for balance. I love it! It’s truly a unique, healing massage.

They use copious amounts of herbally medicated coconut oil in the massage. Have you ever started to sauté vegetables and thought, “Oh yuck, that’s waaaay too much oil!”? That’s what this is like, except now *I’m* the vegetable, and all that oil is *wonderful!* It feels—and smells—absolutely delicious and luxurious. They massage it into my entire body, even my hair.

The daily post-treatment ritual begins with green coconut milk, fresh out of the coconut, on the veranda of the Treatment Center. Then I lie in the hammock in front of our cottage for an hour or more, underneath the coconut palms (see photo at left). It takes me a few days to realize that it’s better not to read, journal, or do anything “productive” after the treatments. It’s more healing and relaxing just to watch and listen to the ocean below, and think of God—or better still, talk with God. After an hour, the oil has soaked into my skin, and it’s okay to shower. Except I don’t really want to shower now, because my skin feels so good just the way it is.

In the second week, I have a rice pudding massage. No kidding: They put cooked herbed rice in a poultice, dip it in fresh milk, and massage me all over with the poultice. At first it’s just wet and cool, but after a bit there’s a thick rice-pudding foam all over me. I am Slipperiness Itself, sliding all over the massage table. It’s fun and it feels great, but what a mess! Well, the therapists are the cleanup crew, so it’s fine by me. We finish with a refreshing bucket shower using herbal water. My skin feels soooo cool and refreshed.

Diksha remarks one day with amazement: “You’re really relaxing! At home, you never allow yourself to relax.” I realize that she’s right, and how therapeutic—and rare!—true relaxation is. And I don’t know whether there’s a connection, but I notice that my toenails—hers, too—are growing at about five times their normal rate. Hmmm. Something is going on here. Maybe I could get used to this relaxation stuff.





*Memo to myself:* Don't wait until next year's trip to Kerala to relax. That Ananda Yoga concept of "relaxation in the midst of effort" isn't just about practicing yoga postures; it's about life!

### The Spirit of Seva

**Day #7, noon**—The remarkable Somatheeram staff are everywhere, dressed nicely in clean, color-coded uniforms so guests will know whom to ask for help: groundskeepers in gold, housekeeping staff in light blue, Ayurvedic therapists in indigo (women) or white (men), restaurant waiters in white shirts and ties, etc. You can get help—even an appointment with an Ayurvedic doctor—at any hour of the day or night.

I marvel at how much can be done with cheap labor, and I find myself wishing, "If only we could have a staff this size at The Expanding Light." (Yes, but could I live in the U.S. on their wages? Hardly!)

However, it's neither their numbers nor their attire that makes the biggest impression; it's their friendly, serviceful attitude. A sincere and radiant smile, along with a warm "Hello, sir," greets me throughout the grounds. It really seems as though it's their great pleasure to host and serve us.

A cynic might wonder, "Are they just looking for tips?" While they certainly don't refuse tips—no one in India does, to say the least—it doesn't seem to be about money at all. Nor is it about the practice of *seva* (Sanskrit for "service to others"). No doubt they are trained to be serviceful, but it's obvious that, although they may be working at their jobs, they're definitely not *working* on their attitudes; they're just being who they are, and I think it truly is their great pleasure to host and serve us. Such true *seva* is beautiful to see.

*Memo to myself:* Next time my energy is dragging on the job—or worse yet, I find myself in the clutches of the dreaded Unwillingness Monster—I need to recall the bright spirit of the Somatheeram staff. After all, I can do my job happily, or not—and it's a lot more fun if I do it happily!

### Evening Delights

**Day #10, 8:00 P.M.**—Tonight, as on many other evenings, we are treated to wonderful entertainment over dinner. There have been Indian flute concerts, a veena concert (a veena is a stringed instrument), demonstrations of *Kalaripayattu* (the Keralan form of martial arts), and *Kathakali* (a traditional form of dance/drama that's unique to Kerala). One night there was a more-modern dance program featuring, among other acts, four of the most lively and mesmerizing young dancers I've ever seen, dancing to a rousing and engaging



*The beautiful lawn where we have our morning and afternoon sadhanas, plus some Ayurveda of the classes. It's just as inviting in real life. (The light-colored background is the beach.)*

modern song from Rajasthan (another region of India). It was utterly infectious and fun!

But tonight, ahhh, this is my favorite: *Bharatanatyam* ("Indian dance"). It is the best-known classical form of Indian dance, with elegant costumes, intricate hand movements, exquisite facial expressions, and bells on the dancers' ankles to enhance the rhythmic and visual effects of the dancing. It is equal parts strength and grace. Each dance tells a story, often from the Indian scriptures, and each movement tells a particular aspect of the story. Although I don't understand all of it, the vibrational meaning is usually evident.



*Here we are in action at morning sadhana on the lawn, viewed from another angle.*



Whereas most other dance forms focus mostly on the lower body, the upper body is more central to Bharatanatyam. An upper body emphasis means an upper chakra emphasis, which naturally helps lift the consciousness of both performer and audience. Swami Kriyananda often emphasizes that all art

should strive to uplift others. In my view, Bharatanatyam achieves that while being entertaining as well.

Words cannot do justice to this art form, nor to the skill of these young performers. They have such strength, grace, precision, and endurance. But what I find most appealing is their ability to give themselves so completely to the dance, without for a moment losing their centers. So many people make life an “either/or” choice: *either* I give myself completely to what I’m doing, *or* I keep my center, but I can’t do both. Well, these young artists prove that it’s a false dichotomy; one *can* do both.

All the guests are loving tonight’s performance. Our group feel blessed to have seen two additional Bharatanatyam performances on this trip, but still, I can’t get enough of it.

*Memo to myself:* Meditate like the dancers: give myself completely to practicing the techniques, yet realize that the practice is not about techniques; it’s about inner perception *through* the techniques. Not “either/or”; rather, “both/and.”

### Sadhana

**Day #13, 7:30 A.M.**—Morning group sadhana (“spiritual practices”: Yogananda’s Energization Exercises, yoga postures, breathing techniques, chanting, and meditation) on the lawn under the coconut trees, looking out over the Arabian Sea. (Well, *they’re* looking out over the sea; as leader, my back is to the ocean. Sigh—the sacrifices that must be made!) The weather, the quiet, and the lush grass—plus the absence of insects—makes an outdoor sadhana ideal.

From the start, the group has really been “into” the sadhanas—two hours in the morning and, when they’re not extending their post-treatment relaxation period, an hour and a quarter in the evening. The sadhanas are not physically intense—“intense” isn’t really what one is looking for during this healing experience (although we certainly get a bit of intensity when we drive on the Indian roads during our two day-long excursions)—and they have a twofold purpose:

- To support the Ayurvedic treatments by relaxing and harmonizing body and mind to make us more receptive
- To bring in the spiritual dimension (since Ayurveda focuses more on the physical and psychological)

Sadhana has had a visible effect on our group—it’s been energizing, bonding, and very uplifting. Day by day, their

inner glow increases, and I can see their awareness and spiritual commitment deepening. Even for those who had prior meditation experience, it seems as though India is opening them to a whole new dimension of their practice.

And the effect has spread to the Somatheeram staff. Whenever they’re nearby, they watch us with transparent interest, as though trying to absorb some of what we’re doing. These are Indians, after all, and spirituality is in their very bones. Even if they don’t practice themselves—and I imagine that most of them don’t—they appreciate its value. One of the senior staff told us that they feel a difference in themselves and in the retreat atmosphere because of what we’re doing; they can feel the blessings. That’s what this entire experience has been: a blessing for all of us.

*Memo to myself:* This is what I need to do more in my own sadhana: concentrate on feeling the blessings that come from making an effort. Even the not-so-good days have blessings if I will just open myself to them.

### Re-Entry Reality

Now that I’m back home and “life” is reasserting itself, I mustn’t let this fabulous experience slip away. My “memos to myself” seem to be a good way to keep it fresh and keep the benefits flowing. I just need to remember.

There’s much more I could mention: the best food I’ve ever tasted (all Ayurvedically prepared), cultural excursions, custom-tailored Indian clothes at bargain prices, etc.—but I hope I’ve given you an idea of what the experience is like.

And in case you’d like a *firsthand* idea, the 2007 Ayurvedic Healing and Yoga Retreat will be February 8–25, with an option to stay on for Yogananda’s Mahasamadhi Celebration and Worldwide Kriyaban Retreat in Delhi. For full details, please visit [www.expandinglight.org/kerala](http://www.expandinglight.org/kerala). We’d love to share this transforming experience with you. ♦



Ananda Yoga Teacher Training graduates Joan Gosling, Lan Gluckman, and Mary Joe Bowling model their gorgeous, newly acquired Indian clothes. Two more of our group enjoyed Ananda Yoga so much during the trip that they decided to take Ananda’s YTT later this year.