



Ayurveda: a way of living

This year Simone Thomasse decided to do a Pancha Karma (a detox) and chose for Sree Krishna, a small clinic in Kerala, South India, where Ayurvedic physician Dr. Vijith Sasidhar is in charge. Affected by the impact on mind and body, the dedication of the staff and encounters with other patients, she asked Dr. Vijith for an interview about the classical Ayurveda and himself. But also: why would you do a Pancha Karma and what is it exactly? >>



Initially Vijith Sasidhar (1978) wanted to study physics, but mostly because of his interest in Indian philosophy he chose Ayurveda (Ayurveda is Sanskrit for ‘the science of life’), five and a half year university concerning ancient Indian science. Afterwards he spent two years with his gurus learning how to heal in an authentic way and started to build up Sree Krishna, his own healingcenter in 2005. Dr. Vijith accompanies both Indian and Western patients who have a wide variety of diseases.

Dr. Vijith: ‘Around thirty years ago my family moved to the same estate as where I live now and also the clinic is located, near the old town Vaikom in Kerala. My mother lives a very religious life and always wanted me to visit the temple. My father however was a communist and a kind of atheist, but he taught me yoga from the age of four; the physical aspect of asanas (yoga postures) to take care of my body in a good way. He bought many books on yoga and this is how I got to a text from Swami Vivekananda about Raja Yoga (the ‘royal way’). That particular book gave me a thorough understanding of yoga and influenced me a lot, I consider it as my bible. The Swami writes amongst others about certain meditative techniques, such as the concept of breathing, which is an area where the conscious and subconscious mind can meet. He is extremely concrete and that induced one of my deepest spiritual experiences. I might have been thirteen years old and do not know exactly what text led me to that experience. Presumably I tried a meditation technique and got into a space where I almost lost my bodyconsciousness. When I came back to myself, I could not believe I existed, nor our house or the walls around me. You

always read that everything is illusion and at that moment I felt that deeply. I was terrified and spent hours biking to get back to normal consciousness again. Yet I kept reading the most several books in this field. Looking back I wonder if I was really able to understand the texts.’

A good preparation for your Ayurvedic studies!

‘Yes, and of course it was already clear which direction I should go, although I must say that mainstream medicine was much more popular and, even in India, more accepted than Ayurveda. But this was what I wanted. I started my studies in 1997, and found out that the ancient Ayurvedic medicine has been given a modern twist. We had to study a mix of western medicine and Ayurveda, which of course has its advantages. At the same time it also meant a shift, because mainstream medicine - modern science generally - is based on physical anatomy, on structural thinking, which is easy to understand for modern people. Looking from that view, it appeared that there are still areas whereof no one knows the function, think of the appendix. That is different in Ayurveda with its

metaphysical perspective. We look at the three constitutions (doshas), the seven tissues (dhatus) and the three waste products (malas). These are the background of our visible body, they form so to say your body, but they themselves are not visible. If you think from structures - a security-oriented way to look at the human body - you become easily lost. Western science has obviously wonderful tools to investigate and for us it is good to have knowledge of it, because patients often take medical reports which I need to be able to read. And sometimes I also need modern techniques such as MRI or ultrasound. As a Ayurveda student you are supposed to study all branches of mainstream medicine, including surgery. That is excellent, also to use it for comparison. Now and then I come to the conclusion that an allopathic treatment is easier, more effective and less painful. This applies particularly to surgery, as anesthesia can be used. I would certainly discuss this with the patient. But really, Ayurveda offers such a safe and scientific framework >>

Daily program Sreekrishna

- 06.00 Wake up
- 07.00 Fire puja by Dr. Vijith at the temple
- 08.00 Daily consultation
Treatments or rest
- 10.00 Breakfast
Rest & discussions
- 13.30 Lunch
Treatments or rest
- 18.00 Dinner
Time to relax and go to bed early

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in which all the knowledge about life can be found! I feel sorry that our modern Ayurvedic universities put Ayurveda in a western jacket, whilst the the other way around would yield so much more.'

What happened after your studies ?

'Once I finished my studies, I clearly knew that unfortunetaly I did not really know much about Ayurveda. If you don't realize this, you might fail. Although I had a license to practice and was registered as a doctor, I did not know yet the core of it. I decided to do an internship in a famous hospital here in Kerala. I learned a lot and got involved in a research project of one of my old teachers. He is an internationally known researcher and director of a well known research institute. For this project I had to study how traditional Ayurvedic healers were practicing. I began to travel, did interviews, sat with them, saw their practice and also asked about traditional methods of training. It was another world of Ayurveda, because this was beyond the reach of the academic way of thinking. The people I visited did not have licenses, but were highly respected by their environment. Even now here in Kerala it is difficult between so-called doctors and traditional practitioners of Ayurveda because of the legal rights. You might understand that it was a great opportunity for me to dig in the circle of traditional healers, because normally there is a lot of resistance to doctors.'

So this is how you met your guru.

'Indeed.This man was introduced as a toxicologist and able to remember many scriptures totally, he quotes the most authentic texts. I respect him greatly and found in him the one I was looking for; someone who has no western medical knowledge, but working very precisely with pure insight of Ayurveda & living it! Being a student I dreamed to see a person who can diagnose diabetis without looking at the blood sugar. And I saw him do so. I thought it was a miracle. Still now he doesn't know what is a normal blood sugar. As far as I know, my guru is one of the few remaining who taught in the ancient method. He has trained around ten persons, including his own daughter. He

would teach them Sanskrit, grammar, indian physics (nyaya, vaisheshika, samkhya): in India we have our own metaphysical sciences, including Ayurveda. His pupils started at the age of seven and their training took ten to twelve years. They would sit opposite the guru for some hours ever day: face to face, heart to heart, and he would tell them things from his memory and experience. Then they will assist and observe him treating his patients. It was really great to see how these young people learned without having any knowledge of western physiology, anatomy and biochemistry. They knew not much about bones, veins or organs, but learned about life. I was so much impressed and asked if he was willing to teach me. He had to think about it, because to be allowed to study the Vedas one need to be a Brahmin and I am not. Yet he accepted me as his student.'

How did that work?

'I handed over the research to someone else, began to learn Sanskrit and sat in front of my guru for daily lessons. The other part of the day I worked in a hospital, I drove two years on my motorbike back and forth. It was a fantastic combination, because I could apply everything I learned directly to the patients in the hospital. At a certain time my old teacher asked me to teach three students who came from the United States after finishing their Ayurveda study, they came to study in Kerala. And so I got the chance to practice myself that traditional way teaching of face to face and heart to heart.

At the age of twenty-five, I returned to my parents house to start my own center which we called Sreekrishna. And because of my American and later also European students, it worked out very well because they sent me patients from abroad. That's why I always treated western people next to my local practice. I married Vidya, she is a docter like me, and besides her work in a government hospital, we work together at Sreekrishna. With the help of our parents and the financial support of some western students, we put up new buildings, so now we have a separate clinic, our own pharmacy, a large herb garden and produce most of the medication ouselves. Every half year I also >>

What is Ayurveda?

The word Ayurveda is usually associated directly with a healingmethod, herbo-mineral remedies and even cosmetics. But underneath that you will find a metaphysical science, focused on the pursuit of a number of qualities. What's it all about?

- 1. Ayurveda is right thinking, do good, and feeling good.
- 2. Your essence is to support the whole. This is called dharma.
- 3. Gather wealth in knowledge, money or fame: Artha which means 'the thing you long for'.
- 4. Suka, or earthly and inner pleasures. Yogis only strive to inner satisfaction, where as Ayurveda gives importance to good food, sex, friends, music and relaxation and enjoy the beauty of nature has the same importance. We experience these temporary, worldly pleasures through our senses. Inner pleasure arises by helping others, doing rituals and meditation.



supervise seven upcoming Ayurvedic physicians during their semi-annual internship, yes indeed, in that authentic way. I hope to raise awareness for the ancient knowledge. And almost every month I visit my guru. I sit with him, study and we discuss new topics for the seminars I'm giving in India and Europe. He supports me in everything I do.'

I understand you travel regularly to Europe to teach?

'From 2008 Vidya and I fly to Europe every year for seminars and consultations. Years ago I had a German student who stayed more than two years with us and when she left home to start her practice, we began teaching in Germany to support her. Also in Amsterdam, as we are connected to the Ayurvedic training from Coen van der Kroon (www.ayurvedicstudies.nl). Every year they organise workshops for advanced students, there is considerable interest. These seminars cover specific syndromes and are rather intense. We study parts of the Ashtanga Hridayam, one of the three classic texts on Ayurveda. I challenge my students to have a critical attitude. They are highly motivated.'

What is so special about the Ayurvedic medicine?

'Many insights are absolutely unique. I am thinking of incompatible food combinations, such as milk and bananas, like you mix them to a milkshake. According to Ayurveda these combinations disturb the digestive fire which ensures a good digestion. How many people take pills to relieve heartburn or because they can not digest their food properly? From the sight of mainstream medicine this is not understood. Nutrition is very important in Ayurveda, and involves not only nutrients, but we look at the whole person including his constitution, the degree of imbalance, his temper and the seasons. Another thing is that when you stop adding hormones and antibiotics to animals or pesticides to plants, that's not the end. Also overfeeding or giving sour grass to obtain more milk is reflected in the quality. And how a farmer treats animals, how they live and eat, or

whether light stays on in barn or greenhouse; all these issues are important for the quality of our food. One good thing what I see in the west is once people understand something is beneficial like Ayurveda, they start exploring it further, more than an average person from my own country. That has to do with the culture. What strikes me is that western people are not only professionally interested, but also to improve their own welfare. Simple insights can be of great help to change the quality of your life. It is a matter of knowing and applying.'

A Pancha Karma at Sreekrishna takes around three weeks, but often I see detoxes offered only taking a few days. How about that?

'First of all, there is some confusion about what a Pancha Karma is, and that confusion has arisen in India. The words literally mean 'Five Treatments', five purifying therapies consisting of vamana (therapeutic vomiting), virecana (purging therapy), vasti (mediated enemas), nasya (nasal administration of medicines) and rakt mokshana (bloodletting to purify the blood). Pancha Karma is the original scientific name for this. Other traditions that arose much later in Kerala, developed five rejuvenating treatments: abhyanga (massage), oilbaths, svedana (sweatbaths), shirodhara (oil treatment of the head) and hot herbal stamps. These rejuvenating treatments were mainly meant for rich people, who wanted to retain their youthfulness and health. In itself there is nothing wrong with this called Pancha Karma, because these are five treatments, right? However, the effect is totally different. The rejuvenating treatments work very nourishing and are by no means suitable for everyone, so it is recommended to inform properly in advance. A classic Pancha Karma is carefully build up with massages and diet, and not only cleanses your digestive system, but is a total body cleansing. The herbs are prescribed specifically on you and taking also into account the season. The treatment works on brains, joints, blood, on everything.'

I really had to get to myself after coming home!

'Therefore it is important to understand that this kind of detox is upsetting your whole physiology. You induce the body's own immune mechanisms and natural reflexes to take things out. The diarrhea or vomiting are used as transporter for impurities. Moreover, hidden ailments become visible. In Ayurveda we say: you clean the channels and bring the fire up. This is the platform for healing. Then you give the right diet, medication and care and healing can actually be achieved. When you get back home, you need to take as many days of rest as the detox lasted. During that period you have to be slow, no exercises, follow your diet and other directions. The better you practice this, the more effective the treatment will be. The results are usually fully noticeable after a month or two only. Moreover, a Pancha Karma is an excellent preparation for surgery. You clean the entire system and make the digestion function properly before you expose the body to a trauma. It will make the wound heal faster and infections are avoided. We do the same after eight months of pregnancy, this will make the delivery easier for mother and child. Furthermore incisions and artificial interventions will be almost superfluous.'

I felt some embarrassment to do a detox in a country with so much poverty and ill people. Until I understood that your western patients enable you to treat your Indian patients free of charge.

'Yes! The western patients are our main source of income and therefore we are fortunate to be able to offer help to local patients in various ways. All local patients are treated free of charge and if we find that it is difficult to pay for the medication, we calculate thirty percent less. This percentage is our profit from the manufacturing. And if people can not afford to pay even that, they also get free medication. We have special training periods for foreign students who come running internship with us and organise free medical camps. We tune in on a specific disease

and invite one hundred to two hundred patients suffering from this disease for consultation, treatment and medication. Meanwhile we launched a newsimple hospital, because the average Indian patient needs less facilities than an average western person. So we can accommodate more people in a room and can offer a bed for hundred rupees (€ 1,20) and another hundred rupees for treatment and accommodation. Again we have the rule: everyone is helped, even if he or she can not afford to pay.'

You really stand up for Ayurveda , also in India.

'That is because I see what happens in developing countries like my country, where the economy currently is on the rise. Everything is marketed, even Ayur-

veda. But Ayurveda is no soap, cream or pill! In itself this is an interesting phenomenon, but we want to represent the non-economic aspect of Ayurveda, an universal science with a history of five thousand years. The Charaka Samhita (ancient scripture) say that once, long ago, sages and saints from around the world came together in the Himalayas to share their knowledge, and from here Ayurveda is originated. You have to imagine that in ancient times there was no disease because people were completely balanced. At early vedic time, physicians did not use any physical medicine; they transferred prana (energy) from herbs to patients without destroying any matter. This changed at the moment people started to acquire. Disease can be seen as dark side of human development .

The special feature from Ayurveda is that it is a way of thinking, acting and living that can be applied within each religion or culture. You can connect it to any kind of art, architecture, business, media and politics. It's not just about eating the right food, drink clean water and breathe clean air, not only about healing or taking care of your body. Ayurveda says that it is important to develop morality, to help others and be a good person. It shows you the way to become divine.' <<

Interview: Simone Thomasse
Pictures: Ewan Noble

