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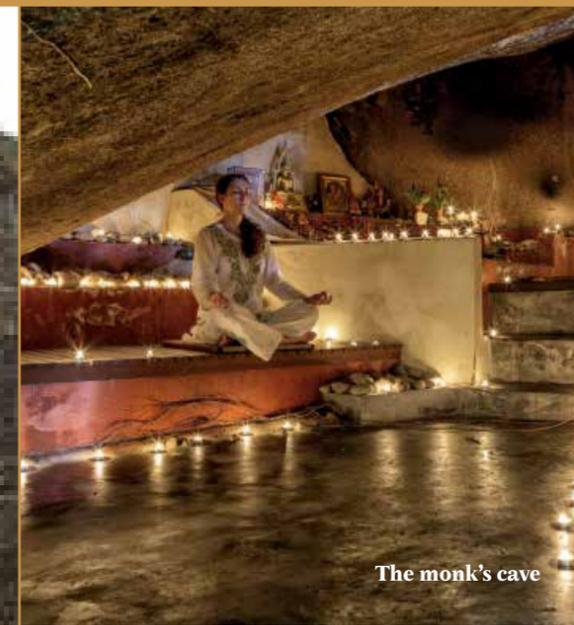
THE *Lotus Realm*

A trip to a luxurious spa brings
a flash of enlightenment

By Todd Cole



The Pavilion



The monk's cave



I can't tell him. I haven't told anyone. Not even my wife. But of all the people in the world, a monk would surely understand, I silently reason. Rajesh, a Hindu monk, sits cross-legged, his deep-brown eyes burning into mine. *He'll think it's a delusion, or a fabrication. This sort of stuff happens to monks, not me.*

As if reading my thoughts Rajesh says, "Many people who come here discover parts of themselves they haven't been in touch with before. Some people find a spiritual element or physical sensation. They can't put their finger on it, but it's a nice feeling."

Nice feeling? Ha! That's an understatement.

"I have a question," I say, my heart rate increasing. "But I need to tell you about something strange—very strange—that happened to me a couple of years ago." He nods. "Please, go ahead."

Rajesh works at Kamalaya, a luxury spa and wellness retreat on the island of Koh Samaui, off Thailand's East coast. As far as spas go, Kamalaya is one of Asia's

best, winning the 2015 Spa of the Year—Southeast Asia & the Pacific—and picking up the 2015 SpaFinder Wellness Travel Country Award as "Best in Thailand", for the fourth time.

It's little wonder. The 5-star accommodation is pure, unadulterated luxury (they have a "menu" for pillows) and it's positioned on a luscious hillside above a tropical beach so cliché pretty it should have its own Instagram account.

The resort offers a range of bespoke treatments that combine massages—lots of different types of massages—and tailored sessions with naturopaths, healers and spiritual advisers, like Rajesh. The manifold effect of this, combined with a delicious, super-clean, mainly vegetarian diet, is designed to create an environment where the guest "feels life's potential", as the retreat's marketing tagline implores.

"To 'Feel Life's Potential' is an invitation to perceive and experience both the personal and the transcendent nature of life," writes founder

John Stewart in an email to me over Christmas.

John and his wife Karina Stewart are the founders of Kamalaya. John spent 17 years in an Ashram in northern India, which is where he met Karina, a Princeton anthropology major with a Master's Degree in traditional Chinese medicine. They became a couple and John discovered an ancient abandoned Buddhist monk's meditation cave on the island, so they built the retreat around the cave, enshrining their collective beliefs and life experience in the resort's DNA. Kamalaya, meaning Lotus Realm in Sanskrit, was born.

The place does indeed have a magical feel about it: an intangible, infectious peacefulness permeates the structures, the land, the staff and eventually the guests.

Three days into my treatment and I'm beginning to have vivid memories of a bizarre experience so far beyond my ken, I have never spoken about it for fear of being labelled mad, deluded or on

drugs. I decide to tell Rajesh, whether he believes me or not.

I begin: "A couple of years ago I was lying in bed, watching a movie," I start, hesitantly. "For some reason, in that instant my perspective on life changed dramatically and irrevocably. It was a radical, crazy paradigm shift."

This is going to sound weird. Here goes.

"Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, everything I had ever known, believed in, or considered real, changed in less than a minute. My world-view exploded, but in a good way. It was at once devastating, terrifying and beautiful, because I suddenly saw that I wasn't me." I pause, remembering the power of that extraordinary realisation, and begin to tear up. "If I wasn't me, then who was I, who was the 'I' observing me?" *Does that sound crazy?* Rajesh's expression doesn't change, but he leans in, "Go on."

Buoyed by his apparent understanding, I went on to explain that, as actor Jim Carrey puts it on Eckhart Tolle TV, "I saw that I

was no longer a fragment of the universe; I was the universe. I was everything and everyone. I saw all thought as a construct."

I related to Rajesh how my inner-life changed markedly from that day forth. I felt as if I had seen behind the magician's curtain and it was awesome, in the true sense of the word. I gave alcohol away, a huge thing for me; and I gave up meat—even bigger. Not because of Ahimsa, but like alcohol, sugar and processed food, I simply didn't desire it and its consumption seemed, well, silly and unnecessary. I wouldn't eat dirt, so why consume meat?

I'd sit and watch clouds form and dissolve for hours, synchronising my breath with their movement and that of the universe itself, an act that now seems crazy, scientifically irrational and egocentric, but at the time seemed not only as natural as breathing itself, but totally attainable if I tried long enough and desired it.

I'd walk the dog and be overawed by the smallest observation, the way

morning sunlight bounced off the dew, a warm and genuine smile from a stranger. Laughter came easily and often. Pain, despair and disappointment still existed, as did success, pleasure and comfort, but I saw them as two sides of the same coin: nothing more than amusing protrusions in life's flat plane. They were passing sensations, their only significance was the ridiculous amount of influence they exerted over the people I loved.

Confrontations or arguments didn't happen because invariably I acquiesced on every point, thinking, "If they wanted to be right that much, it must mean a lot to them. I hope this makes them happy."

Compassion, kindness, charity and empathy weren't acts in life; they were the very fabric of life. I saw beauty everywhere and in everything, even the mundane and prosaic; in fact, mostly in the mundane and prosaic. As Henry Miller wrote, "The moment one gives close attention to anything, even a blade of grass, it becomes



a mysterious, awesome, indescribably magnificent world in itself.” Never a truer word was spoken.

(I should point out, at this point into in my life I had some knowledge of Buddhism, yoga and meditation but while I understood the term enlightenment, I had no experience of it nor did I actively seek it. On the contrary, I was your typical middle-aged suburban beer-around-the-BBQ dad, which is probably why the revelation shocked me so.)

“My world changed radically, and for about seven or eight months I was deliriously happy,” I finish telling Rajesh. “Then I began to worry that I would lose the feeling.” I paused, exhausted from my confession, and saddened by the story’s impending conclusion.

Rajesh leaned back in his chair with a knowing smile. “Then?”

“Then it went, poof, like that. Gone. Now it’s like a dream and I’m exactly how I was before, if not unhappier. And that’s my question: how do I get that feeling back?”

Rajesh shook his head and matter-of-factly said, “You’re never going to get it back, not like that anyway.” He went on to explain that it was a temporary state of enlightenment and said he’d counselled several people who’d had similar experiences, which made me very excited and feel less like a nutter.

“One man, a German, had it for five years. He saw light around objects and people. After his feeling vanished, he went on a world quest to get it back, trying drugs...”

“Yes, yes,” I interrupt. “I sometimes saw solid objects as illusory, truly see-through... and I was toying with the idea of going to South American and trying Ayahuasca (the

conscious-altering drug),” I begin, excited that someone has knowledge of this and may be able to offer a solution. I wanted to talk all day, but Rajesh held up his palm.

“Let’s meditate.”

We meditated together, but my monkey mind was impossible to quiet. In the end, Rajesh’s instructions were disappointingly pedestrian and didn’t involve drugs, exotic travel or even books. “Don’t read,” he said when I asked what texts I should be reading. “To experience that sort of consciousness again, you must now regularly practice what came as a consequence before: compassion, kindness and self-discipline and yoga—or any exercise—but meditation twice a day is a must. You must work for it now.”

“Why does the feeling go?” I asked. He smiled broadly, his white teeth beaming. “You became attached to non-attachment.

“His instructions were disappointingly pedestrian and didn’t involve drugs, sex or exotic travel...”

Ironic, isn’t it?”

A little crestfallen by Rajesh’s banal prognosis, I pass an email to John Stewart with some pretty curly questions about how to rationalise both “the personal and the transcendent nature of life”. His answers don’t disappoint.

He writes: “Both day-to-day reality and transcendent reality are relevant and are possible and perceived through consciousness. Both are coexistent and, in truth, there is no separation...”

“What I mean is: from the Vedic and Buddhist traditions we learn that the day-to-day nature of reality is ultimately an illusion, yet at the same time we experience it as real. We live it and we deal with it moment to moment, we must attend to it, our life depends on it, our karma is created by it.

“One can not successfully live in transcendent reality unless one also successfully lives in the embodied, physical and material reality. I once asked my teacher Babaji, ‘Were we created or did we evolve?’ He answered, ‘Consciousness grew until desire manifested the body to express itself.’

“Then he told me that ‘desire creates our material reality and reduction of desire returns us to Divine reality’.”

If you had to design an environment that promotes both a beautiful material reality and lets one ponder a Divine reality, you couldn’t do any better than Kamalaya. I decided to take Rajesh’s advice and poured my duty-free gin down the sink, started practising yoga in the morning in Kamalaya’s stunning pavilion, ate vegetarian food, and meditated in the morning for 20 minutes, as instructed. I did a self-styled CrossFit workout in their well-equipped gym in the afternoon and swam laps in the infinity pool afterward until tropical thunderstorms chased me indoors. The day finished with a massage, a steam, a spa and another meditation.

While I felt healthy and happy, nothing was happening on the raised consciousness front. Then, on my last morning, I awoke to a glorious sunrise. On the balcony I sipped lime and water, and as I was appreciating the beauty of the sunlight glinting off the morning dew, a housekeeper walked past and greeted me with the traditional Thai wai and a smile so warm and genuine my heart soared. I felt a deep and abiding love for her and all of humanity and then, for the smallest instant, there it was again, in all its magnificence and beauty, the feeling; life’s potential.

www.kamalaya.com

On Doing Nothing

An amusing allegorical tale as told by Rajesh Ramani

One day a government auditor arrives at a temple to check the accounts. The temple has several attendants on its books, one of whom sits all day doing nothing. The auditor looks at the books and sees the attendant receives food, clothing and pay. He asks the temple’s top monk, “Why do you spend so much every day on this guy? He does nothing.”

The monk says, “But doing nothing is not an easy job.” The auditor scoffs and says the lazy attendant should be fired, but then goes home and decides to try to do nothing. After a minute, he is thinking about work, scratching his face, looking at his watch. The next day, the auditor returns to the temple and says to the monk, “Whatever that guy is paid, double it.”